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Vol. LXXVI.

THE GOLD-LACE SPORT.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.



THE TWO KNAVES FELT THEMSELVES JERKED OFF THEIR FEET AND SENT AROUND IN A DIZZY DANCE.

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THE TWO KNAVES FELT THEMSELVES JERKED OFF THEIR FEET AND SENT AROUND IN A DIZZY DANCE.

The Gold-lace Sport;

OR,

The Texas Samson's Wide Swath.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE MAN FROM DENVER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE INFANT FROM BROBDINGNAG.

"STEADY, Babel! If there isn't some sort of a ruction bubbling forth over yonder, then I've lost my knowledge of me mother tongue!"

In all his glory of silk and velvet, gold lace and silver buttons, a latter-day giant was idly strolling through the unpaved streets of that queer little border town, on amusement bent, when harsh and angry tones came to his ears.

Quickly locating those sounds, he strode past the nearest corner, then stopped short with bright eyes kindling as they took in the scene spread before them.

Yonder stood the Shamrock Hotel, at which he himself had secured a room, and close beside it was a drinking-annex, called the "Harp of Erin," both places owned and run by a portly if not good-looking son of the Emerald Isle, Dennis Maloney by name.

And Dennis was doing the talking, just then.

"Will ye be after movin' out o' this, thin? Ah-ha, ye schaaamin' baggage, ye! Comin' here to begoile foolish divils out av thayer money be way o' puttin' ahn stoyle undherfoot, begobs, whin ahl the toime thayer ow in'meslate good money foor betther whisky! Git oot o' that! Git oot o' that, thin, or Oi'll—g'wan away, thin, Oi'm tellin' ye!"

His face flushed purple, his bald cranium glowing like the sun setting through a fog, the landlord shook a pair of ugly fists over that shrinking shape—the figure of a boy, as Sparkler Sam thought at first glance, but as he took another step forward he realized his mistake.

Despite his crushed hat of felt, the belted blouse, the full trowsers, the trembling boot-black belonged to the gentler sex, and a flush of generous indignation leaped into the comely face of the Herculean Sport as he saw the landlord add action to words.

A thrust of his foot sent chair and blacking-kit off the porch to the unshaded ground beyond, and his red paws made a vicious clutch at the recoiling girl as he cried out:

"Must Oi t'row ye aff, thin? Must Oi—"

Dennis Maloney left the threat incomplete, for, with a flash and a glitter, the Gold-lace Sport sprang to the front, sternly crying out:

"Hands off, you perambulating whisky-jug! Touch that kid and I'll make you think the he-old goat's got after you, Irish!"

Maloney turned with an ugly oath, but before he could do aught or say more, he was helpless in the grip of that giant.

One hand closed upon his collar, its mate caught a leg, and as both acted in perfect concert, the stout landlord whirled over in air, spoiling a beautiful somerset by slipping as his feet touched the floor, sitting down with a force that jarred the entire building.

A roar of laughter broke from the little crowd, drawn mainly from the well-patronized bar of the Harp of Erin, but Sparkler Sam turned eyes upon the shrinking bootblack, instead.

He could only catch an imperfect glimpse of her face, but that, with the peculiar garb she wore, gave the impression of immaturity, and he never for an instant doubted her being other than "the kid" he had called her on impulse.

He could see that the girl was frightened or abashed, and his big heart came wide open.

"Don't you cry, Kid, that's a darling!" he said, softening his boisterous voice to suit the occasion. "He sha'n't touch a hair of your pretty head, for—Steady, Irish!"

"An' who the divil may ye be, thin?" spluttered Maloney, who was just trying to regain his footing, but pausing involuntarily at that sharp command.

"Call me the Baby from Brobdingnag—call me the Patagonian Pet—call me anything save one of your sweet-scented litter, Irish! And since you've shown such a burning interest in this matter of polishing understand-

ing, let's see how far you understand polishing. Come, you bloated monopolist! Every first-class hotel ought to own its bootblack, and since you bar others from plying the trade, come and fill the vacancy, Mr. Maloney!"

Sparkler Sam planted one generously-proportioned boot upon the box which had held blacking and brushes, smiling in answer to the laughter coming from the amused spectators.

But Dennis felt anything save mirthful, just then. His head was still dizzy from that unexpected somerset, his flesh was sore and his bones ached from that heavy shock, while the pride of which no man is entirely devoid was awakening.

"Black yer boots, is it, thin? Me?"

"That's what's the matter with Dennis!"

"Be dommed av Oi do, thin!"

"Be dommed av ye don't, comes a mighty sight closer the bull's-eye of solid fact, gentle stranger!" coolly amended the Gold-lace Sport as he drew a revolver from where it was nearly hidden by his broad sash of plaided silk. "Don't you think you'd better reconsider your determination, Dennis?"

Maloney blanched to an ashen gray as he stared full into that menacing muzzle; then he shrunk away with a husky howl of angry terror.

But, as he moved, so did the gun, and although his speech sounded like mockery, there was an undercurrent of stern resolve in the added words which fell from those mustache-shaded lips:

"You're mighty poor game to go gunning for, Dennis. You're neither fish, flesh nor good old side-meal! A buzzard couldn't eat you raw, and smoking wouldn't take the curse off! Still, this is solid old business, and I'm its prophet!"

"Instead of destroying the budding industries of this, our beautiful city, you ought to encourage them. And so, last call, Dennis! Come to the front and bestow upon me a bit of the polish you surely lack, or die in the bloom of your virginal youth!"

Maloney recoiled a bit further, when Sparkler Sam added, in clear, cutting tones:

"Black my boots, you cur, or I'll scatter your brains to the four winds of heaven!"

There was no room left for doubting his perfect earnestness, now, and fairly crawling that way, the fat landlord picked up brush and blacking-box, giving a muffled howl as the revolver-muzzle gently tapped his hairless crown.

"Touch lightly on that off-corn, Dennis, an' ye love me! Play 'twas the dimpled chin of your own Colleen Bawn you were caressing, Maloney, for when my acher aches, then my forefinger contracts, and—what an ugly fellow you would be, Dennis, with your roof gone to seek its long vanished thatch!"

"For the love av heaven, sor!" groaned the unhappy landlord, his mouth so fear-parched that he could hardly find moisture to add to the blacking.

"No it isn't, Dennis," lightly amended the Gold-lace Sport as he tossed a glittering yellow coin toward the shrinking girl. "It's for solid coin you're laboring, and while you do the work, the little kid rakes in the shekels! Lively, Blackey! Don't you see how many other gentlemen are waiting for your services? By the sweat of your brow ye shall make amends for playing hog in the manger, Dennis!"

"Divil burn—bliss ye, sor!" uttered the perspiring landlord, forcing a sickly smile as he looked up at that face so far above him. "Sure, thin, 'tis a dirthy—a foine joke ye're playin' aff on yer bethers—on a poor divil that niver meant anny harrum, sor! An' the gintlemin—ugh, ye blaggairds!" flashing an evil glance toward those mirthful spectators. "Grinnin' thayre loike a Chessy cat, the gang o' ye all! Av Oi don't play aven wid ye, thin me name's not—"

"Steady, Blacky!" and the revolver-muzzle again tapped that bare pate in additional warning. "Too much chin-chin, too little worky! Polish me, or I'll polish you off! I reckon I can do all the orating this genial assembly can get away with: so more elbow-grease, Dennis!"

With many a groan and half-stifled curse the portly son of Erin's Isle completed the work so reluctantly begun, and, as Sparkler Sam stepped from the box, lifting first one foot then the other for a critical examination

by the bright rays of the afternoon sun, Maloney wiped the grimy drops from his heated brows.

"Augh, thin! 'Tis you foor a foine joke, sor! A foine joke, faith, an' ahl foor the binifit av Dinny Maloney! 'Tis me that's your sarvint foor that same condescension, sor! May yez live antil Oi can pay yez back it ahl, sor, wid interistadded to make it ahl aven, sor!"

"Never mention it, Denny; it cost me nothing," airily spoke the Gold-lace Sport, with a wave of his large but shapely hand. "And, besides, you'll need your breath to carry you through with the day's work, I'm thinking."

"'Tis woork Oi'll charge foor heavier than yez be thinkin', maybe, sor, yer hanner," muttered Maloney with an evil glow in his little eyes as he started to rise to his feet.

But, a heavy hand dropped upon his shoulder, forcing him to his knees again in front of the chair, while Sparkler Sam called forth:

"Next! Step up, gentlemen, all, but take your turns in due order. You never had another such chance to get your understanding polished, and I doubt if you ever will have a similar opportunity granted you. So, this way, gents! Only one weenty dollar a shine, and the cart-wheels all go to the Kid as treasurer of this unique combination!"

"Roll up, tumble up, any way to get up, just so you don't—Thank you, sir!" as one of the grinning witnesses came to the front with ready coin, which was accepted by the glittering Master of Ceremonies, only to be passed on to the girl, who only remained because her retreat was now fairly cut off without calling unwelcome attention still more particularly her way.

Again Dennis Maloney tried to escape the trap into which his brutal rage had hurried him; but Sparkler Sam would grant no grace, show no pity, and as often the portly landlord would find that grim muzzle staring him full in the face, with those big blue eyes mocking at him over the polished tube of death.

Doggedly he worked on, mumbling curses barely above his breath, now and then aiming dire threats at the grinning fellows whom he was forced to serve through fear of death, but never again daring to even covertly swear vengeance upon him to whom he owed this bitter humiliation.

From time to time Sparkler Sam spurred the amateur bootblack to quicker work, for the little gathering had now become quite a crowd, and there was no lack of men ready to pay a dollar for the added pleasure of having the portly landlord perspiring at their feet.

"Don't be too mighty critical, gentlemen!" admonished the Gold-lace Sport. "Remember, Denny's a new hand at the bellows, and can't be expected to put a looking-glass finish upon every stogy. So—just make it a lick and a promise, Dennis, or we'll never get the day's work done before to-morrow week!"

"Augh, sor, isn't it carryin' the foine joke a wee bit too far, sor? Sure Oi wouldn't want to sphoi sport, sor, but av—"

"Too many dollars rolling our way, Dennis, and the Kid isn't—I say, stranger!"

The Gold-lace Sport seemingly had eyes all over his head, for nothing of consequence was permitted to escape his notice, let it happen on whichever side it might.

He caught sight of a well-dressed man moving leisurely along the street, without paying attention to what might be transpiring there by the Harp of Erin; and with an eye out for the dollars which were so steadily rolling into the treasury, Sparkler Sam hailed the passer-by.

The gentleman turned quickly at that peremptory call, revealing the face of a stranger, for he surely could not be classed among such citizens as were there congregated.

A quick glance, then, reasoning that the summons must be intended for another than himself, the stranger moved on; but only to be hailed again by the master of ceremonies.

"I say, John!"

"Do you mean me, sir?" sharply demanded the stranger, turning again.

"You bet your sweet life I mean you! Come over here and get your boots shined up. Only one dollar, and— I say!"

"Oh, go to the devil!" angrily cried the

stranger moving away. "I've got no time to waste over such—"

"Dollars to cents you have, though!" cried Sparkler Sam, throwing forward his pistol and firing with lightning-like quickness.

CHAPTER II.

SPARKLER SAM AVENGES AN INSULT.

THE stranger gave a start and an exclamation, for the bullet, striking the dry ground close by his feet, glanced up and away with a shrill whistle that gradually died out in the distance.

A shower of dust and dirt flew over his feet, and the Gold-lace Sport lightly called out:

"Your hoofs are dirty now, stranger, even if they weren't before!"

"How dare you—" indignantly began the stranger, only to be cut short by those half-mocking, half-earnest tones.

"Business is business, and I'm doing the soliciting, pardner! Walk right this way, unless you'd rather be carried on a shutter! Come and take your medicine with the rest of us. Denny isn't much on polish, but he's grim death on corns. Will you oblige us, gentle pilgrim?"

A hot flush came over the darkly-handsome face of the stranger, for he felt that his nerve had failed him for an instant when that spiteful explosion came. He was stung with shame at thought of his awkward recoil, and if he took a step in that direction, it was more through anger than because of fear.

"I really can't see why I should humor a drunken bully, sir, and—"

"Meaning my mother's son, eh?"

"If the coat fits you, why put it on!"

"You never found a worse fit in your life, my dear fellow, and you'll surely say the same when I let you take a sample of my breath," swiftly retorted Sparkler Sam. "But, business before pleasure, always! And—you come next on the programme, dear boy! Come, oh, do come, darling!"

There was more of whimsical raillery than of stern menace in both tones and expression, just then, and the stranger lost a little of his anger as he came to that conclusion. Still, he seemed in surly mood as he spoke again:

"Play clown to your own circus, if you must, sir, but you may count me out; and that's flat!"

He turned away, but the master of ceremonies sharply cut in:

"Steady, pardner! This is straight business, and if you can't come down gracefully, you'll come down all in a heap! Now—polish up or polish off! Nothing for the work and one dollar for the blacking! Come like a lamb, or you'll come like a mut-ton!"

That business-like weapon held him covered, and, as Edgar Winklejohn met that coldly steady gaze over the leveled tube, his face paled and his mustached lip gave a brief quiver of mingled rage and fear.

"Don't make me bust another cap, stranger, for I never could miss a target twice hand-running! And—ah, thanks, me noble lord!"

"It's your turn now, but mine may come later," assumed Winklejohn, as he advanced, forcing a smile that contained precious little mirth. "It's against my rules to fight before supper, but I'll see you later!"

"Is that so? Well, you're just like me, only different. I'd rather fight than eat, any day and every hour. But, we'll not row over a trifle the size of that, stranger, so long's you do your share toward supporting this infant industry which—Take a seat and make yourself to home, dear boy!"

With effusive cordiality Sparkler Sam seated the young man, then urged the perspiring bootblack to renewed industry.

"Shine 'em up lively, Denny, or I'll charge you double price for getting you the situation," he declared, scattering a drop of sweat by a playful tap of his revolver. "Oh, do get a move on, Irish! Look at the growing line of customers, and every man-jack of 'em all with a cart-wheel in his fist! Who says business isn't booming in our town? Who dares even hint that—Tender over the ticklish points, Denny! Can't you see the gentleman flinch?"

Edgar Winklejohn gave a smile which showed his teeth at that, and there was a

wicked glitter in his dark eyes as they lifted to the big blond face which towered above them all.

"You saw me flinch, just a bit ago, sir, but that was when you caught me off my guard. I naturally supposed I was among honest men, if not gentlemen, and so—"

"Apology accepted, my dear fellow!"

"Wait until I offer you an apology, please. I've just this much to add: you're dealing this little game, but I'll try to play even before it's time to cash in the chips!"

"After business, pleasure, eh? All right; and if you can't find me right handy, maybe I'll take the trouble to look you up! But now—I reckon you've got your dollar's worth, pardner!"

"Not if the coin goes into your pocket!"

"If it was so destined, I'd let it wait until you get ready for the general cashing-in, pardner," coolly retorted the Gold-lace Sport; then waving his unarmed hand toward the shrinking shape of the girl, he added: "I'm only a deck-hand, sir. There you behold the captain, who'll take the price of your polish: one dollar, and no change returned at this establishment!"

Mr. Winklejohn rose from the chair, slipping hand into pocket as he looked in that direction, for the first time taking note of the silent partner in that queer business.

A warm flush suffused that drooping face, and a swift glow leaped into his own eyes as he saw more than Sparkler Sam had thought of, as yet: saw that the supposed "Kid" was in reality a budding woman!

Slipping a coin into her reluctant hand, Winklejohn spoke on the impulse of the moment:

"There's a dollar for the shine, my dear, and now—five more for permission to kiss those pretty red lips of yours!"

His hand touched her chin, meaning to lift it to the more easily meet his bending face; but, with a low, indignant cry the maiden struck both coin and hand away.

A fierce, indignant roar burst from the human colossus as his keen ears caught that insult, and, swift as thought, his mighty grip fastened upon the young man, jerking him from his footing, whirling him around and upward, holding him helpless in air.

Winklejohn struggled to break away, but he was like a babe in those muscular hands. He gave a cry of mingled rage and fear, but that only won an additional shake as the giant strode apart from the amazed crowd, harshly thundering:

"Shut up, you son of Satan! I spotted you for a cur at sight, but this is worse than I took you for! Now—here you go, Johnny Dude!"

Handling the fellow much as a lusty lad might manipulate a puppet of straw, Sparkler Sam whirled Winklejohn twice around in mid-air, then turned him end for end, bringing him down astride one of those high-booted feet, swinging him back and forth to gather the required momentum, then tossed him high in air, to turn a double somerset before alighting "on his beam-ends" in the midst of a patch of prickly pears!

A howl of delighted wonder burst from the astonished crowd, but 'twas a howl of far different nature which came from the lips of the victim, just then, as he floundered upon that mass of spines and itching needles!

The Texas Samson hardly paused to see his human puppet alight, but turned toward the now sobbing girl, just in time to intercept her hurried flight.

"Don't you cry, sissy!" he urged, with bluff but thorough sympathy, one big paw closing on an arm and keeping her captive while he curtly addressed the portly land-lord.

"Take care of those tools, Maloney, until I come back. And if yonder black-advised dude wants to know how came he so, just beg him to keep his linen on until Parker Sampson is at leisure. Now, come along, Kid!"

If the Kid had been the boy he first thought, in all probability Sam would have picked him up bodily, tucking him under an arm to beat a quicker retreat; for, from past experience he knew how little it takes to turn a laughing crowd into a howling mob.

At the moment all were favoring him;

but, a minute later, every hand might be lifted against his life!

No one even tried to bar their passage or delay their steps, for the giant had too recently exhibited his wondrous muscle for that.

Striding around that corner, then taking the next turn as quickly as those long legs could cover the ground, Sparkler Sam spoke again:

"So far, so good, Little 'Un! Now, where do you hang out? Whither lies your palatial abode, me noble duke? Just sling a hoof that way, and we'll wait to reckon our winnings until we're safely at home under our own rooftree!"

The girl murmured something: just what, even those keen ears failed to comprehend; but, as she quickened her steps, the Gold-lace Sport took the same direction, giving her little hand a friendly pressure as they hurried along that otherwise deserted street.

"It's all right for once in a way, Kid, and I'm 'way-up glad that I had a chance to add to your winnings; but, all the same, your old man—you've got a father, of course?"

"No. Father is dead; and mother—"

"Well, just change the gender, and it reads pretty much the same tune," cut in the sport, holding fast to the little hand in spite of the effort its rightful owner made to withdraw the member. "It would be bad enough to send a boy out among such a gang of toughs, but a girl—too much no good!"

No answer came to those kindly if rather rough words, and after a few minutes more rapid walking, they slackened pace in front of a small, forlorn-looking frame building—hardly more than a shanty, when viewed from the outside.

"We live here, sir," faltered the girl, still keeping her face more than half hidden by the leaf of her felt hat. "Mother is—is not strong, sir. And—you will not frighten her—please?"

A swift, fleeting glance upward which gave the Gold-lace Sport an unaccountable thrill; then the girl opened the front door and sprang inside, just as though she meant thus to escape further investigation.

But Parker Sampson was not so readily baffled, and with a far graver face than he had thus far shown, he strode forward, pausing only when safely across that threshold.

A tall, slender woman rose at their entrance, giving a little cry as she leaned forward with hands tightly clasped together, a feverish light in her sunken eyes, but which as quickly dimmed when she failed to recognize the intruder.

"A gentleman who—who was very kind to me, mother," the girl said; by way of introduction; then hurrying from the room like a child who dreads a merited scolding.

On his part, the Gold-lace Sport was hardly feeling at ease, just then.

Back yonder at the Harp of Erin he had begun to wonder if his first estimate was wholly correct, and those doubts were strengthened by the half-shy, half-defiant glance which the girl had given him as they drew near her humble home.

Surely she might justly be termed "the Kid"? And yet—just as surely those were eyes of woman, not of child!

It was a new sensation for the genial, bluff, impetuous giant, and he found it anything but an agreeable one.

That caused him to appear at a disadvantage before those gravely sorrowful eyes, but Sparkler Sam had an object in view, and at once plunged into the midst of it.

"I've brought your little girl home, ma'am, and though she's been in no great danger, perhaps, yet it isn't just the thing—sending out a bit of a child like that, togged out in boy's clothes, to black boots for a living. It isn't right, ma'am, begging your pardon for saying so!"

The mother sunk back into the cushioned chair she had left at their coming, her lips quivering, her eyes filling with tears as she gazed up at that strong, honest face so far above her level.

"I know—I know all that, sir; but, what can I do? We must live, and so—I have worked until my health is broken, my strength all gone. I begged Rhoda not to go, but

she said—how could she stand idly by and watch her mother starve, sir?"

Sparkler Sam looked swiftly around the room, and though all was kept neat and clean, everywhere was written poverty!

His voice softened, but still he stuck to his text.

"Of course she couldn't, ma'am, but surely there's other and better methods of fighting the wolf from the door? And Rhoda—she's getting too big a girl now to play the part of a boy. And so—you have no other means of support, then?"

"No, sir; only poor, dear Rhoda. I took in washing until my strength failed me, and I grew so ill— Oh, sir!" her hands clasping tightly as they lay shivering upon her lap, while that former eager, wistful hit came back to her eyes once more. "you only could aid us?"

A flush shot into the Sport's face, for this surely sounded like the plea of a professional beggar. Still, one hand slipped into a capacious pocket where both yellow and white clinked musically together; but with a swift gesture the woman checked his movement.

"No, no, sir! Not that! Don't imagine that I am begging for alms! It was foolish, perhaps, but when I looked into your face, so frank, so honest, so kindly even! I thought—if you could only help me, sir!"

Sampson looked abashed, and quickly withdrew his hand, empty.

"Tell me how I can help you, ma'am, and I'll do it, gladly," he assured. "I had a poor old mother of mine own, once, and whenever I see—I mean, how can I help you, ma'am?"

The woman hid her face in her hands for a few moments, plainly trying to command her emotions.

The Gold-lace Sport stood uneasily by, in silence. This was a new experience for him, and he felt at a loss what to do and how to act.

Presently the woman rallied her powers, and forcing a wan smile, again gazed wistfully into his comely face.

"It was partly in hopes of finding him, or of learning something about him, rather, that Rhoda thought of this—this unfortunate method of making a living for us both, sir."

"Just so, ma'am; but, if you could only speak a little plainer," hesitated the Sport, fingers playing with the stuffed snake wound around his felt hat. "Not because I'd intrude, you understand, but if I'm to be of any real service—eh?"

"If you could only tell me about him? If you only knew— Do you know anything about a gentleman named Morgan Gwynne, sir?"

"A lawyer, was he?" slowly asked Sampson, his eyes drooping a bit. "And a relative of yours, perhaps, ma'am?"

"A lawyer, yes; not a relative, but a friend who— You do know him?"

"I did know him, ma'am, but now—well, I'm sorry to say he's dead."

With a low moan she bowed her head in trembling hands, murmuring:

"Dead? Then my last poor hope perishes with him!"

CHAPTER III.

SPARKLER SAM MEETS WITH A SURPRISE.

SHE looked the very personification of despair, and her attitude was such as to accentuate her emaciation; she seemed little better than a living skeleton, just then, although even the embarrassed Sport could not help recognizing the wreck of past beauty.

Although the big fellow was fairly overflowing with sympathy, he stood helpless, for this was taking him entirely out of his natural element.

Few knew better how to handle or deal with mankind; but with women—that was quite a different thing!

To complete his discomfiture, at that moment a vision appeared before his startled eyes—the vision of a neatly-garbed, beautiful young lady!

With a low, soothing cry, she sprung across the room and sunk to her knees by the grief-stricken woman, clasping her frail form in her arms, pressing warm cheek to that bowed head, while murmuring words of sympathy, of love and of encouragement.

"Bear up, mother dear!" she urged gently, seemingly with thoughts for her alone, yet flashing a swift, side-look toward the dumfounded Sport. "Surely all is not lost while we live for each other? And never yet was cloud so dark but light could shine behind it!"

She said much more, but the words, musical though the tones were, passed unheeded, if heard by the marveling Hercules.

Surely this could not be "the Kid" whom he had treated as a spoiled, if not willful child?

Ah! yet—it certainly was! For those were the same big eyes, bright yet soft, brown and lustrous as the orbs of a shy fawn!

How well he remembered them, now, just as they had shot that shy yet defiant glance into his face, out yonder!

The same, yet how different!

Then she seemed an awkward, immature child, her faults accentuated by the uncomely garb she had donned for the occasion; but now, a young lady, with tastily arranged brown hair, neat if plain dress, and a face fair enough to satisfy an artist!

All this Sparkler Sam saw almost like one in a dream: and as he began to realize the awful ass he had made of himself for that once, he flushed hotly, and instinctively backed toward the door in abashed retreat, catching heel in the worn carpet and nearly tripping to a fall!

Rhoda gave a little cry, and her mother roused up at the sound, then both women reached forth hands as though they would intercept his flight.

The daughter sprang to her feet and came forward with hand extended, moisture in her eyes but with a half-smile playing about her redly-ripe lips as she spoke:

"I can thank you, now, sir," with a faint emphasis on that word as her long-lashed lids drooped slightly before his honest if involuntary look of admiration. "Only for you— See, mother, darling!"

With a laugh that was at least partly artificial the girl dropped a little shower of coin into her mother's lap, then hurriedly giving her an account of the past transaction.

"Of course I couldn't earn it all, dear, but when that odious old Maloney—ugh!"

"I'll break his fool neck if he ever dares to look crossways at you, miss, I mean—"

"I'm Rhoda Maynard, sir, and this is my mother," quietly said the younger woman; for now she seemed just that, and Sparkler Sam felt like kicking himself as he remembered how he had called her kid, and child, and—worst of all!

If he could only blot it all out, to make a fresh beginning!

Mrs. Maynard seemed dazed by that metallic shower, for a few moments, but then she rallied her powers, seemingly forgetful of the much needed money in her burning desire to learn more of that now dead friend.

Still, hospitality shone through all, and in a tone of gentle reproach, she bade Rhoda place a seat for the gentleman.

Although far from feeling at ease, Parker Sampson was in no great haste to flee from those bright and velvety brown eyes; so he accepted the chair proffered, and with the grimly ornamented hat held on his lap, he spoke in subdued tones:

"I wish I could have given you better news, Mrs. Maynard, but, lying wouldn't help you any in this case, I'm thinking."

"You have news, then, of Mr. Gwynne?" asked Rhoda, likewise seating herself, but closer to the side of her invalid mother.

"Bad news, I'm sorry to say," Gwynne wasn't a relative of yours, may I ask, Miss Rhoda?"

"Only a friend," quickly answered the widow. "But, we hoped so much through his efforts! And now, it's like losing our last earthly hope to hear that he is gone—dead!"

"You knew him, then, sir?" asked Rhoda, as her mother once more bowed face in trembling hands. "He was your friend, also?"

"Just as he was the friend of everybody save himself," gravely replied the Sport, beginning to feel a bit more at ease with himself and his surroundings. "Of course you knew his ailing?"

"Poor Mr. Gwynne!"

"That's right: poor Morgan Gwynne! Whisky got the better of him, just as it has

of so many fine fellows in the battle of life. I felt sorry for him from the first, but never so sorry as in his last days!"

"How did he—what was the ending?" asked the widow.

"It came after weeks of crazy drinking. Gwynne had joined the Texas Rangers, hoping to fight off the infernal thirst when he would be so far away from supplies; but, he was too far gone, and contrived to get all the poison he could swallow."

"Then it all happened so suddenly that no man could save the poor fellow! In one of his maddest fits, he rode his horse into the Rio Grande, leaping from a high bank, and died, cursing Cortina and all his infernal 'lambs!'"

After this brief but gloomy recital, there was silence for a brief space. Mother was weeping, daughter was silently striving to calm her overstrained nerves, while Sparkler Sam was eagerly if covertly watching and studying that lovely face.

Alternate flashes of heat and chills assailed him, and surely few men ever more earnestly bewailed their past sins than Parker Sampson regretted the awkward error he had fallen into that day!

To call this lovely young lady "a kid!" To treat her as one might only treat a spoiled child! To make "a holy show" of himself before those glorious eyes, when he might have figured solely and purely as a gentle knight of chivalry!

"Then you are a member of the Rangers, sir?" asked Mrs. Maynard, at length; but the Gold-lace Sport was so busy with his thoughts and his study of that charming face that he never heard the question!

A quick flash sprung into the woman's eyes as she took note, and then she looked lovingly into the same face while speaking:

"Yes, this is the little girl you brought home, sir. This is Rhoda, my sole hope and reliance, now! A woman, now; and I've lost my little girl forever!"

Sparkler Sam started a bit, brushing a hand quickly across his eyes as though to clear his vision. For a marvelous resemblance made itself felt, and he involuntarily exclaimed:

"How like! How wonderfully like she is!"

Rhoda flushed a bit under his intent gaze, drawing back a trifle, as though displeased; but Mrs. Maynard turned almost ghastly pale as she leaned forward, eyes literally burning as they fastened upon the face of this big stranger.

"Like whom, sir?" came the demand, almost fierce in its interest.

The Gold-lace Sport gave a start in his turn, and flushed a bit as he noticed that painfully intent gaze; but then he said, gravely:

"Of course it's merely one of those odd coincidences one keeps running up against, ma'am, but I really can't help it! If I didn't know different, I'd stand ready to swear—"

"What? Speak, I command you, sir!" almost screamed the terribly agitated woman, paying no heed to the efforts made by her child, even striking down the loving hands which would have lent her needed support. "You mean far more than you have said, as yet! Like whom? Like whom, I ask?"

The sport hesitated still, because he dreaded to add to that really dangerous excitement; but then, seeing that continued suspense would be even worse, he slowly spoke:

"Did you ever know or hear of a young lady named Georgia Winklejohn, Mrs. Maynard?"

The widow sprang to her feet like a corpse galvanized. She gave a hoarse, gurgling cry, flinging up both hands to the full extent of her arms, then would have fallen to the floor like a log only for the swift spring and sure clutch of the Gold-lace Sport.

Rhoda likewise sprang to her aid, but the daughter seemed even less frightened than the stranger, for she spoke distinctly:

"It is only a faint spell, sir, and not dangerous. If you would be so kind—to the bed, yonder!"

Sparkler Sam quickly moved across the room and placed the senseless widow upon the bed, then drew back a little to leave the

daughter fair chance to care for the sufferer.

This was done with the swift readiness which told of former similar attacks, and though she looked very pale and sad, there was no wild terror to be read in Rhoda's face as she presently turned toward Sam.

"There is nothing you can do more, sir, and I thank you for what you have already done."

"But—I don't like to leave you alone with—she looks like a corpse!" muttered Sampson, unsteadily. "Can't I do something? Go for a doctor, or anything! Say I can help you, Rhoda, dear!"

A swift flush came to her cheeks at that impulsive speech, but the girl let it pass without open reproof; perhaps she was too wholly absorbed in her mother's case to really notice the familiarity.

"There is nothing you can do, sir, else I'd willingly accept your kind offer. Mother will rally, shortly, and then—it might make her worse to see you, just at first! I mean—I don't mean—"

"Just at first? Then I may come back, later?" eagerly pleaded the Gold-lace Sport, marvelously meek for one of his usual carriage. "You'll forget what a John-donkey I made of myself, back yonder? I thought you were only a child, and now—I know what the angels look like!"

With a sudden movement he caught the little hand nearest him, lifting it to his lips with reverence such as none save those of his own caliber can feel for woman.

He pressed a hot kiss upon the little paw, then dropped it as if frightened by his own audacity, beating a hasty retreat to and through the doorway.

As another man might have fled from armed foe, the Texas Hercules hurried away from that humble home, never once looking back until a turn in the street effectually concealed the house from his gaze!

"Holy Ebenezer! If I didn't play the fool again, hope may die!" the big fellow muttered, removing his uniquely-ornamented hat to brush the hot drops of sweat from his fair brows. "And yet—if her hand tasted so honey sweet, what would her lips—go 'way honey! You've done lost yo' taste!"

Hardly had the words been uttered when a man sprang out from hiding, crying harshly: "Draw and defend yourself, you rascal!"

Then a revolver cracked as Sparkler Sam swiftly whirled around.

CHAPTER IV.

SPARKLER SAM CRIES A TRUCE.

THAT movement was purely instinctive, yet in all probability it saved the life of the Texan Hercules.

Instead of piercing his brain as was intended, the bullet merely plucked viciously at his yellow locks in passing, seeming to scorch an inch of skin but without drawing blood.

At the same instant Sparkler Sam recognized his assailant, and with a sort of smothered roar, he leaped forward, one hand shooting out in advance to clutch the still smoking weapon, his head ducking low the better to avoid a second shot.

But, none came.

He who gave that brief warning had felt so certain of his prey that even yet he failed to recognize the truth; and not until those fingers had closed upon both pistol and hand did he even think of firing again; and then it was too late!

"You, is it?" cried the Sport, recognizing Edgar Winklejohn as he added wrench to grip, for the moment paralyzing that hand, then tossing the pistol far away from them both.

There came no reply, for good and sufficient reasons; the mate to that hand was closing tightly around the stranger's throat, lifting him fairly from his feet and shaking him there much as a mastiff might shake a terrier puppy.

Winklejohn writhed and kicked, striking out blindly with his hands, but was literally helpless in that mighty grip, and already was turning purple in the face.

A terrible expression had come into the modern Samson's face as he found himself so viciously assaulted, but now that he held his enemy impotent, those stern-set features relaxed and a sneer curled his mustached lip.

"Why, you blessed little dude! Did you

manage to pluck up courage enough to jump on a man's back? Who'd 'a' thunk it of ye, Johnny!"

He gave the writhing victim another brief shake, then lowered him so his feet could touch the ground, slackening that awful grip in time to keep from having another death laid at his door.

His head half turned the better to catch sounds coming from no great distance, and recognizing in them a curiosity which would hardly prove welcome, just then, he again grasped Winklejohn, hustling him away from the spot with far more speed than grace.

"Quit your fool kicking, or I'll tote ye like I might a sack of grist!" the Sparkler Sport muttered, harshly, as Winklejohn fought mechanically against the movement.

"Do you want the whole town grinning at your monkey-shines? Must I turn-up and paddle you to the tune of their guffaws? Play white, or fare the worse, Mister Man!"

Betraying a marvelous sense of locality for a stranger within the gates, Sparkler Sam hustled his captive away to a spot where there was little if any danger of being intruded upon, then released his hold, hands on hips and legs wide planted as he took a leisurely survey of the young gentleman who had so desperately tried to "play even."

Edgar Winklejohn was hardly himself, as yet, though rapidly rallying both in mind and body.

"So, youngster, that's the way you've been brought up, is it? To kill a white man from ambush, like a currish—"

"I warned you! I told you to draw and—" muttered the other, at the same time fumbling in his breast for a weapon.

Swift as thought itself acted the Texas Samson, and once again his mighty grip closed upon Winklejohn's throat, blue eyes blazing as their owner sternly spoke:

"Steady, you vicious little ape! I spared you twice, but now why shouldn't I smash you, eh?"

Lifting him clear of the ground with that one hand, Sparkler Sam doubled its mate tightly, shaking the huge fist before those protruding eyes, then drawing it back as though to dash it with crushing force full upon that now unguarded face.

"I'd ought to smash you, just once!" he added, striking swiftly, yet timing his movements so admirably that the blow was checked just as knuckle brushed nose. "I know I ought to paste you one, but I was born a fool, and have grown worse ever since!"

Again he slackened the grip which rivaled the Spanish garrote, hand dropping from throat to shoulder, only using force sufficient to hold the fellow fairly upon his uncertain pins.

"I say I'd surely ought to lend you one for his nob," repeated the sport, "but I don't want to kill you, and any lighter tap would ruin your good looks for a year to come! So, call it even, pardner, or, shall I?"

No need to say more, in words. That massive fist was shaken in the stranger's face, then slowly drawn back in readiness for a paralyzing stroke.

Winklejohn flinched, as well he might. Few men who had once felt the enormous power of those hands but would have done the same.

"Don't—don't strike me!" he muttered, a flush of shame dyeing his swarthy skin as he made the hardly voluntary plea.

Instantly that grip was relaxed, and Sparkler Sam drew back a bit with a low, genial laugh under which lay not the slightest trace of anger or distrust.

"It's a whack, gentle pilgrim, and I can't remember a weenty thing about any of it!" he added, heartily grasping and shaking one of those reluctant hands. "We both of us made a mistake, I reckon, if not more of 'em."

"Your latest was in sounding your rattle before biting, back yonder, and—"

"I gave you warning, sir!"

"That's what I'm saying, pardner. You did give warning, after a fashion, or you might not have wasted your lead so completely. Or, did you really think I carried my heels in my hat?"

"You played me dirt, and I swore to get even!" surlily spoke Winklejohn, smoothing his ruffled mustache with still unsteady fin-

gers, while his black eyes glowed with a light that was far from amicable.

"Well, all that helped make up the double error, I reckon," added the Hercules. "Maybe I was just a weenty bit too enthusiastic, but I took her for a kid, needing the coin we all had to throw away, and—that was my mistake, you see?"

Winklejohn forced a smile, but spoke no words, just then.

"I took her for a kid, when she was an angel-woman!" added Sparkler Sam in softened tones, after a brief silence.

"Of course you called her that, after hustling her away from the crowd," sneered Winklejohn; but, before he could say more, a warning hand rose in front of his face and Sampson spoke, sternly:

"Careful, Mr. Winklejohn! You've got off mighty easy, so far, but you don't want to crowd your luck too brash. I'm a perfect cherubim for peace and amity, so long as you don't try to curry me against the hair; do that, and I'll kick worse than a bay steer full of prickly oats!"

"I never meant— Oh, confound the girl, anyway!"

"Drop it, I say! And now, I want you to introduce me to the governor, Johnny Winkle!"

"I don't— Eh?"

"I mean just what I mean, and that's what I'm saying, pardner. Give me a knock-down to the old gentleman, and we'll call it square!"

"My father, you mean?"

Sparkler Sam gave a hearty guffaw at that, leaning back with hands on plaided hips, lungs fully inflated, the very personification of jolly good nature.

"Talk about quickness of comprehension!" he exclaimed, as that laugh reached a natural ending. "Why, pardner, you could give a snail an inch and beat him by a neck in a mile dash!"

Flushing angrily, young Winklejohn turned away, but the Texas Samson as quickly joined him, slipping hand through reluctant arm and talking glibly as though the friendship had lasted since birth.

"That's one of the things that makes me fairly love you, pardner! You catch a hint so swiftly, you grant it so gracefully! Now half the fellows you meet in a day's jog would turn up nose at such a request, and the other half would turn the cold shoulder, after wanting to know why in thunder you wanted to know!"

"Well, I don't know as I blame them, much!" surlily muttered the young man, but his remark passed by without notice.

"Now, you're different. You act clean white, and even hurry a fellow off for the introduction without taking time to say you'll grant the favor—as of course you will?"

Winklejohn jerked his arm free, facing the Gold-lace Sport with his dark eyes glowing keenly. A brief stare, then he said:

"Are you in earnest? Have you business with my father?"

"Yes, double-times-over!"

"All right. I'll take you to the governor, but, would it kill you to button your lip for a minute or so?"

"You couldn't ask a greater favor, my dear boy! I never did like to talk, for it makes my tongue sore! And, you see, I was born bashful—so bashful that I never could find my tongue when in polite society! And a gentleman of your caliber in such fine feathers, makes me feel so out of place that I couldn't utter a syllable if my very life depended upon that enunciation!"

"Good heavens!"

The Sparkler laughed lightly, but reined in his lively tongue, for the time being, saying no more until Edgar Winklejohn nodded toward a fairly well-appearing house not far ahead, through the front door of which a flashily-garbed man was just then making his exit.

"There's our house, for the present, sir," he explained. "We really couldn't put up with the hotel accommodations, so rented—"

But Sparkler Sam was paying no heed to his words, seeming wholly absorbed in the man ahead who wore the peculiar garb, and whose hard-featured, swarthy face took on a fierce grin as he briskly passed them by, hand on knife-hilt.

As they passed each other, the big Sport

spat in stern dislike, then abruptly addressed his present companion:

"Do you know that dog of a Greaser, Winkle?"

"Suppose I do, what then?"

"You can boast the acquaintance of a mangy cur, then, pardner," retorted the Sport, with a return of his customary lightness of speech. "I only hope you don't call him friend, as well as admit his acquaintance!"

"Why so? What's that to you? Who gave you the right to criticise my friends or my acquaintances, I'd like to know?"

"Well, I've called you pard. I've walked arm-in-arm with you under the broad light of day. And as for the rest—well, I really expect to hang Diego Sandoval, some day, and I was wondering whether the same noose would catch you!"

As he spoke, Sparkler Sam lifted hand to sound a brisk tattoo on the closed door, but, before any one from within could have answered the summons, Edgar Winklejohn turned knob and pushed the barrier wide.

"Walk in, my dear sir!" he cried, half-mockingly, lending the giant a gentle impulse with hand on shoulder as he spoke.

The Sparkler needed no further invitation, but strode across the threshold, doffing hat with a graceful bow as he glimpsed a feminine figure a little to one side.

A tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered man rose from a chair at that sudden intrusion, a short if not sharp exclamation crossing his lips; but without paying heed to this, Edgar spoke, curtly:

"A gentleman to see you on business, father. As for his name—"

"Parker Sampson, at your service, sir," supplemented the Sport, bowing again, but with eyes only for—yonder young woman!

More clearly than ever did he perceive the truly marvelous resemblance, now! In hair, profile and feature one was duplicate of the other—the only difference lying in dress, age and physical development.

Although in a measure on his guard, Sparkler Sam was so forcibly struck by that resemblance that he might easily have betrayed himself, only for the fact that the young lady arose and immediately left the room, making a bare acknowledgment of his respectful bow.

Edgar Winklejohn gave a low, brief chuckle as he saw how closely those blue eyes followed the graceful movements of the young lady, and there was a poorly-disguised sneer in his next words:

"Surely I understood you to say that your business lay with my father, sir? If not, shall I beg Miss Winklejohn to return, then?"

Sparkler Sam was swift to rally, and complacently rejoined:

"It is a sight to cure sore eyes, pardner, for an honest fact! If you make the same offer a bit later, I'll jump at the chance to kneel at the feet of beauty and grace built up in one masterpiece, for—"

"Alcm!" coughed the elder Winklejohn, frowning until his shaggy gray brows nearly met above those coldly bright black eyes. "May I ask in what manner I can serve you, sir?"

"Well, for a modest starter, just one question: do you happen to know anything in particular about the fellow who just left this house? Diego Sandoval, I mean!"

Mr. Winklejohn flushed hotly, his eyes gaining a bit of unusual fire at the same instant. And his tones were harsh as he demanded:

"Pray, sir, what concern is that of yours? And, who may you be, anyway, sir?"

"That's dead easy, my dear sir! My name is Parker Sampson, sometimes given a twist which converts it into Sparkler Sam. As for the rest, I'm living in hopes of playing executioner with Diego Sandoval to practice on, as soon as the devil gets his just dues!"

"What is all this to me, sir?"

"Maybe much, maybe nothing, just as fate will have it, sir. Did you never read about poor old Tray, when you went to school?"

"I really can't understand—"

"Then I'd be worse than an ass to waste my breath further," cut in the confident Sport, with a gesture as though casting aside an unwelcome matter.

"If this formed your sole business, sir, may I be allowed to bid you a very good afternoon?" broadly hinted the elder Winklejohn.

"A very neat hint, but it's thrown away on yours truly, my dear sir," blandly smiled the Hercules, sinking into a chair with thumbs in armpits and fingers beating a gentle tattoo upon his broad chest. "As it happens, I have other business, namely: a message from Austin Leonard."

"I'll never see him—never, sir!" cried Winklejohn, harshly, as he sprung from his chair with hands tightly clinched. "Go tell him so, sir!"

"You talk just as though you meant it all, too!"

CHAPTER V.

SPARKLER SAM TALKS BUSINESS.

"I do mean it, sir! I mean it every word, sir! I'll never meet that infernal scoundrel—"

"Easy, there!" sternly warned the visitor, with hand flying up and forward. "Don't forget that you're talking of Austin Leonard, one of the cleanest, whitest, best and most honest pards mortal man ever was blessed with! And, though that mayn't be quite so much to his credit—you're speaking of my friend, sir!"

"Take the message back to him, then! I'll not listen to it; I'll never meet that man again, I tell you, sir!" stormed the elder Winklejohn, now seeming fairly beside himself with rage. "Never—never will I meet or recognize Austin Leonard, sir!"

Sparkler Sam slowly waved his open hand back and forth, as though seeking to mesmerize the old gentleman; if nothing more, he succeeded in stopping that angry flood, then spoke:

"You distinctly vow that you'll never meet my old pard, Leonard?"

"I repeat it, sir; I never will meet him again!"

"Well, that's pretty certain, too, unless you change your ticket, Mr. Winklejohn," his smile fading away and his face taking on a saddened expression to match his tones as he added: "Poor Aus! He's gone aloft!"

Father and son gave simultaneous starts and exclamations, both faces betraying powerful excitement if not intense relief and gratification.

"Gone aloft?" echoed Julius Winklejohn. "Do you mean to say that Austin Leonard is—has—what do you mean, sir?"

"Is the fellow dead, at last?" harshly demanded Edgar, in turn.

"As nail in door!" gravely quoted the caller.

The words were still warm upon his lips when there came a faint, half-smothered cry from just without that room, followed by hasty sounds which the Sparkler did not wait to analyze further.

Springing across the room with pantherish grace and lightness, he opened the door through which Miss Winklejohn had recently passed, drawing the barrier partly to as he leaned forward, thus effectually blocking both vision or passage for the moment.

He caught just a glimpse of flying skirts, and a grim smile curled his yellow mustaches, for recognition came with that glance.

"What's the matter?" harshly demanded the elder Winklejohn, pressing forward, only to be blocked by that huge bulk as the Texas Samson drew back and closed the door again.

"Just the cat, I reckon, gentlemen," was his off hand explanation; and without further care he turned back to the seat he had so suddenly vacated.

Father and son passed through the opened door, but saw nothing to confirm their suspicions.

They muttered a few words together, then returned to the room, shutting and locking that door before resuming their former positions.

Sparkler Sam was the perfect picture of careless ease, now, though his native boisterousness seemed a bit toned down by such sorrow as a true pard might well feel while talking of a recently deceased friend.

He had already learned far more than he dared hope for before entering that building, and hoped to make his venture more profitable ere it closed.

From all save his black eyes Julius Win-

klejohn had banished all emotion, and in calm tones begged the messenger's pardon for betraying such unseemly violence.

"If you could only guess one-half the bother, worry and vexation I have suffered through that—on account of Austin Leonard, sir, you would be more ready to make allowance, even if you didn't hold me fully justified in all I may have said and done while so aroused," came his plausible explanation.

The Sparkler listened respectfully, bowing at the end, but without further committing himself. He was in no particular hurry to finish his visit, as yet, for he was hoping for more;—was straining his ears to their utmost to catch faint sounds from beyond that locked door!

Winklejohn frowned, and his son fairly scowled over that provoking deliberation. Then the younger Winklejohn spoke:

"You say you bring a message from Leonard: what is it, sir?"

A brief but bright flash came across those big blue eyes, for their owner caught the faint sounds for which he was listening. He knew, almost beyond a doubt, that Georgia Winklejohn had crept back to the door, yonder, and was breathlessly listening for further tidings!

"Well, gentlemen, I said a message, and as such I have cherished it in my memory ever since poor Aus. crossed the Great Divide!"

"Then there is no room left for mistake: he really is dead?"

"Just as surely as he has been dead to every person who bears your family name, since the black day he was driven forth from what he held as dearer than heaven, sir!" sternly declared the Gold-lace Sport, with naught of acting in his manner, now. "You and yours killed him, then, just as surely as though you had bored brain with bullet, or driven knife to his heart! I say it, gentlemen, and neither one of you dare deny the charge!"

Father and son interchanged swift looks, but neither spoke. Surely the impetuous stranger would say all they needed to hear, without the urging through questions?

"Don't mistake me, gentlemen," added the Sparkler, in milder tones. "Poor Aus. never once told me you knowingly wronged him: he wasn't built that way, for one thing, and for another—well, I reckon his soul went out when the joy of his life was quenched, that day!"

A faint sigh or smothered moan came from beyond the closed door, but only the ears of the visitor caught the sound; and even he would have failed, only for expecting some such sign.

"Leonard never made open moan, never told all the world his sorrows, gentlemen. His heart was broken, but he never showed it on the surface. A truer, bolder, better pard never trod the footstool. He lived a man, and a man he died, yet—believe it or not, as ye like—hedied with a broken heart!"

Again that faint sound from just outside the room, and the ghost of a smile quivered that golden mustache. Though all else might fail, Sparkler Sam was assured of having carried one coveted point.

Neither of the others in that room noticed the sounds, for Edgar was audibly sneering, Julius was slowly, softly rubbing hands together as they lay between his closed knees.

A crafty light glittered in the father's eyes, and a crafty smile still further wrinkled his sallow cheeks and drew his skinny temples. Then, as the Sport paused, like one expecting denial or question, the thin lips parted to let pass the words:

"Pray, sir, what interest can all this have for me? Beyond the simple fact of his death, what care I about Austin Leonard?"

"But your daughter—"

"Excuse me, sir: I have no daughter," interrupted Julius Winklejohn, sharply.

"What? No daughter? Surely I saw the young lady when—"

"My niece, Georgia, you mean."

The Sparkler uttered a low whistle of unaffected surprise; but, as quickly he rallied, to ask:

"But, your name is Julian Winklejohn, sir?"

"You are speaking of my brother, Georgia's father. His name was Julian, while mine is Julius," explained Mr. Winklejohn.

"Then your brother is dead?"

A curt bow gave that assurance, and Sparkler Sam let the matter drop, so far as that particular point was concerned.

"Well, as I started to say a bit ago, even if you haven't any particular interest in what became of poor Aus. Leonard, your niece, who so shamefully jilted him—"

"Drop that, will you?" sternly exclaimed Edgar Winklejohn, making a menacing gesture as he partly rose from his chair. "Even as a guest, sir, you can't couple that epithet with the name of my cousin!"

"The truth is no scandal, surely, gentlemen?"

"If it was the truth—but it isn't! You tell him, father."

A brief pause, then the elder Winklejohn slowly spoke:

"There is not so very much more to tell. Mr. Sampson can term it jilting, if he fancies that term most befitting. As for myself, the plain facts are quite sufficient."

"And those plain facts are—just what, sir?"

"Miss Winklejohn was compelled to dismiss Mr. Leonard as a suitor, simply because he was leading a notoriously irregular life: because he was forming friendships and associations so vile and low-down as to wholly unfit him for decent society, much less the companionship of a young and virtuous maiden, sir!"

"That comes from your point of view, Mr. Winklejohn, and I'll merely made this comment: just as the devil is never so black as he's painted, just so I feel assured that you are laying on the colors with too free a brush. And, before his death, Austin Leonard began to suspect that he had fallen victim to foul play on—whose part do you reckon?"

Edgar gave an angry cry at this thinly-veiled charge, but Julius merely showed his remaining teeth in a wintry smile before adding:

"Hints are easily let fall, Mr. Sampson, but proof? Have you anything to back up your insinuations with, my dear sir?"

"Wait, please," coldly retorted the Sport, lifting a hand to hold further words in check. "Austin Leonard appointed me his executor before death came to his relief, and I made solemn oath that I would probe the matter to the very bottom, sparing no pains to bring the whole truth to light! And, I'm here, as the first step toward that end, Mr. Winklejohn!"

With a poorly-smothered oath the son sprung to his feet, gripping chair-back with hands as one might clutch a deadly weapon.

The Sparkler likewise arose, but his words were directed toward father rather than son, at first.

"That is merely by way of honest warning, sir, for it's a rule of mine to treat all as white until their actions proclaim them black. And, I repeat: I'll get at the bottom facts of this business, and if I discover any trickery or foul play, I solemnly swear to punish the dirty workers as their deeds merit! That's my duty, and I may also say it will be my pleasure."

"That's enough—and too mighty much!" harshly asserted Edgar Winklejohn, as he thrust hand into bosom, to jerk it forth with a four-barreled derringer in his grip, catching the drop on the undaunted Sport with all the skill of a professional expert.

"You've played the bully long enough, you overgrown rascal! Now take a walk, or I'll make a skinner of your skull!" cried the incensed younger Winklejohn.

His every look and tone betrayed how thoroughly in earnest he was while making this threat, but the effect produced was hardly up to expectations.

The Sparkler neither flinched, nor ducked, nor dodged, while striving to draw a weapon in turn; but with a cool, even insolent smile upon his broad face, he held his ground, laughing out, briefly, before speaking:

"Ah, don't keep on playing fool, Johnny Dude! If you should bust a cap accidentally, and hurt your betters the same way—"

"You're not my better, sir! Go, or I'll bore you through!"

"If you should hit me by accident, Johnny Winkle, the citizens would run you up a tree so mighty sudden you wouldn't

have half time to kick! Put up your gun, or— Put up or shoot, you crack-brained idiot!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPARKLER WARNED OF BREAKERS AHEAD.

It was a superb bluff, but one that proved successful, just as the Gold-lace Sport expected.

With a coward it almost would have insured a shot on the instant, but, whatever his other weaknesses, Edgar Winklejohn lacked considerable of being a cur or poltroon.

If Sparkler Sam had lifted hand to strike, or to guard, a shot would surely have followed, and at such close quarters must have killed or crippled. So, too, if the big fellow had attempted to draw a weapon.

But, when his derringer was so boldly faced, a smile of contempt irradiating that comely visage, its owner more than inviting a shot, the armed right hand grew irresolute for an instant; barely so long, but that proved quite sufficient for the dauntless Sport.

Swift as thought itself his left hand shot forth, his head ducking and drawing to one side as his body followed, and before the young man could divine what was coming, that hand closed over pistol and fingers with a force that threatened to weld metal and flesh together!

A jerk, a deft thrust of foot, then young Winklejohn was laid on the broad of his back, while his laughing conqueror quickly slipped the shells out of the derringer, handing the empty weapon to the elder Winklejohn, with a graceful bow and bland speech:

"You'd better keep the toy, sir, until your kid knows better how to use it. First thing you know he'll hurt somebody—or get hurt himself!"

A fierce burst of rage came from the defeated young man, but Sparkler Sam did not see fit to await his rallying.

"See you later, gentlemen!" he added, as he dropped the now harmless weapon on the nearest chair as Julius Winklejohn made no move toward accepting it. "Hope that meeting will be a friendly one; but, don't forget that I'm Aus. Leonard's best friend, even in death!"

The last words came just as he opened the door, and that barrier closed behind him as the young man scrambled to his feet.

With all his outward carelessness Sparkler Sam was not throwing away many chances, and rather more than expecting the young fellow to follow, with that derringer or another similar weapon, he kept both eyes and ears upon the alert; but, no chase was made, thanks to the cooler-blooded old lawyer.

His still strong arms flung around his son, and that hold was maintained long enough for his lips to instill a bit of wisdom, even if his words failed to lessen the fierce mortification which Edgar surely felt.

Knowing naught of all this, but content with the part he had so far played in the little drama, the Sparkler turned the nearest corner, then strolled easily onward, the picture of self-content, a big, whole-souled, rollicking youngster, over whose head a quarter of a century had rolled without lessening his love of fun, of noise, of color, or of reckless fanfaronade.

His velvet jacket, his broad sash of plaided silk which contained all the colors of the rainbow, his fawn hat with snake-skin ornament, his ruffled shirt and neatly-fitting trousers; all glow and glitter as the sun-rays were reflected from silver buttons and gold lace, his high-topped riding-boots setting all off with their dead black, supplying the very contrast the eye needed to perfect that picture.

More than one pair of admiring eyes followed the lithe and blithe sport as he moved aimlessly through the border town—eyes of women whose fancy was caught by the gleam and glitter, as well as of others who saw the man rather than his garments.

Men, too, were not lacking in observation, for, brief time as Sparkler Sam had passed within their gates, he had already made a unique record for himself.

But neither man nor woman really approached the handsome giant, and Sampson was not sorry for that fact.

Careless though he seemed, his brain now was unusually busy, and a portion of his thoughts would have startled the Winklejohns, from father to son and niece, could they, by any magic, have studied his brain.

Full of his own thoughts, the Sparkler kept on his aimless way until he had nearly cleared the town; then he paused, flashing a swift look around on all sides, like one who has fair reason to suspect the proximity of human foe.

That first glance showed him nothing to cause either annoyance or alarm, but, as he was on the point of retracing his steps, heading for his quarters at the Shamrock Hotel, he caught sight of a fellow half hidden behind a little patch of rocks and bushes.

A hand instantly dropped to weapon, but paused there without drawing, for an open hand showed itself, palm his way, while the skulker cast a look over shoulder toward the town as though dreading observation from that quarter.

Begins to look like business, for a fact!" muttered the Sport, trying to penetrate that bit of snug cover with his keen eyes. "I wonder how many ducks he's got hidden in there?"

Only by holding his position did the adventurer betray his suspicions, and no one at a distance would have seen aught out of the way in either man or his manner.

"I say, pardner!" called out the half-hidden fellow, in guarded tones, as he came more into view on that side of the covert. "I'm your friend if you'll let me."

"All right, and friend goes!" promptly assured Sampson, as he moved easily forward, hand on pistol-butt. "You want to prove it, though! Hands empty and stand quiet! I'll drill you if you try any monkey-work, old fellow! That's business, now!"

"I'm just doing it for you, sir," quickly asserted the stranger, whom Sparkler Sam failed to recognize as one he had ever met before. "They're going to double-bank you if they get half a show; so I reckoned—"

"Who's going to double-bank and jump me?"

"Well, maybe you know the Greaser: Yellow Diego, they call him, when they talk behind his back: Sandoval, I reckon his last name is."

By this time the Sparkler had drawn near enough to feel fairly certain that bit of cover contained no other living being, and too confident in his own prowess to fear aught any one man might do, he took hand from weapon, and pausing where he could readily command a fair view of the near town, spoke again:

"Diego Sandoval, eh? Yes, I know the fellow, and know mighty little good about him. Friend of yours, eh?"

"Augh!" and the stranger spat to one side with sharp disgust. "I'm not exactly an angel, stranger, but I'm too near white to pard-in with a dirty Greaser; and, least of all, with Yellow Diego and his pals! Why, man, dear! what'd I be here for if I parded 'long o' them rocky imps?"

"You do look a bit too white for that, now I come to take a closer squint," frankly admitted the Sparkler. "By the way, wasn't you one of the fellows who took a dollar shine out of old Maloney, to-day?"

A broad grin wrinkled that none too clean visage at the recollection; but he shook his head in negation.

"Not just that way, boss, but I saw it all. Fact is, I gave the girl a quarter—I hadn't anything bigger, for money won't stay in my kicks nowadays, sir!"

"Elbow crooks, eh?"

"That's what!" admitted the fellow, his face falling for a moment. "I can't help it, you see, but when Denny caught me paying over—well, I reckon he has got a pretty full slate hung up against me, so he just kicked all over like a balky steer! But, you chipped in, and—"

"Just so," impatiently interrupted the Sport. "But you said something about double-banking, I believe?"

"I just happened to be where I could catch a few words, you see, sir, and 'twas Yellow Diego doing the talking. You know his pals: another Greaser they call Pablo Zarate, and a Kickapoo?"

"Birds of a feather, eh?"

"Nigher buzzards than anything sweeter-scented, too!"

"When you call Sandoval their boss, it tells the rest. And I was to be jumped: did you learn when or how?"

The fellow shook his head, reluctantly.

"Not quite so much, boss. I heard Diego saying that you'd got to go over the river, and that they must down you the very first chance; but I wasn't where I could hear more, and counted myself in big luck to get off without their either seeing or hearing me."

The Sparkler nodded his head, plucking at his imperial the while. A far-away look filled his big blue eyes, and the smile that came into his face was far less pleasant to see than the genial glow ordinarily found there.

For nearly a minute silence lasted; then Sampson quietly spoke:

"Thanks, pardner. And now, would the whole town go into the deepest mourning if anything serious should happen to either or all of these three pretty fellows, think?"

"Well, scarcely!" with a sardonic grin

"Good enough! Just keep your eyes and ears wide open, pardner, and possibly you may see more sport before the moon grows old!"

"Then you'll do the jumping, boss?"

"Well, I'll not be the one to do all the dancing when the band begins to play, bet your bottom dollar on that, pardner! And, that makes me think: just to wipe out an old debt, you understand?"

With a careless grace Sparkler Sam drew forth a little handful of coins, dropping them into the half-eager, half-reluctant hands of the informer, who muttered:

"I don't—I didn't do it for pay, sir!"

"That's all right, and unless you wish to offend me, pardner—why, man, dear, don't I tell you it's an old debt I've been owing your father's son for a round month of Sundays? Hold fast all I give you, and—by the way, what is your handle?"

"Tom Billson, and I'll never forget—"

"That's all right; and if you don't believe me, just ask the old man when you meet him up the next time. Now, so-long, pardner! Don't poison yourself any worse than you've got to, is my best advice!"

The Sparkler hurried away, unwilling to listen further to the gratitude which called tears to eyes long unused to such pure moisture; but as he drew nearer the more thickly built-up portion of the town, he half-unwittingly turned toward the house rented by the Winklejohns.

At least one of his reasons for coming to that town was connected with the family just named, and it was with a half-hope that he might at least win a fairer glance at the young lady, who so strangely resembled Rhoda Maynard, that Parker Sampson turned in that direction.

It was a retired portion of the town, and few persons seemed afoot at that hour; but that some were astir was quickly made manifest, and that after a rather startling fashion.

"Help! Oh, uncle! Save—Ah—"

The cry was smothered as by violence, but Sparkler Sam had caught sufficient to send him at full speed around the deserted building which cut off his view, and he came fairly upon a man and woman, one struggling to free herself, the other smothering her wild cries for help!

At first glance the Sparkler recognized the gaudy garb of a Spaniard or Mexican, and, as an intuition of the truth flashed across his brain, he dashed forward with a stern cry of warning.

"Let up, there, you whelp of Satan! Hal! you, is it, Sandoval?"

Recognition was mutual, and, as he looked that way, warned by that stern cry, the Mexican bandit dropped the woman he was holding, to jerk a revolver from his belt.

But, swiftly though he moved, the Sparkler was still more prompt, for he held the drop he had caught as he strode forward.

"Steady, you cur! Lift hammer or muzzle and I'll kill you like a mad-dog! You know me, and I know you; so—steady, all!" was the warning.

The woman so abruptly let fall rose to her knees in affright, hands clasping as she looked bewilderedly around.

Sampson recognized Georgia Winklejohn, but he had no time for wondering how or why she had fallen into such evil company.

An old feud was lying between himself and Diego Sandoval, and the Mexican brigand would only too gladly shed his heart-blood if the ghost of a chance was given him.

That chance was not now, it seemed, for the Gold-lace Sport kept him covered and was almost within arm's-length of the ruffian.

Sandoval shrunk back, his hard features fairly convulsed with rage and hatred, longing yet fearing to make the move which could hardly end save in the death of one or both.

A savage snarl showed his teeth, and the Hercules Texan knew the crisis was at hand, even without the warning gasp and words which broke from the blanched lips of the young woman:

"Look, sir! Oh, they'll kill you—they'll murder you!"

For, as she spoke, two armed men sprung in sight around the clump of bushes, thirsting for the life-blood of the Gold-lace Sport!

CHAPTER VII.

THE SPARKLER'S LITTLE EXPERIMENT.

WELL for the Texan that he was as swift to act as quick to divine, else even that combination of warnings might have failed to extricate him from that double death-trap.

The warning of Tom Billson was still fresh in his mind, and the face of Diego Sandoval betrayed its owner just in the nick of time, for, even before Georgia Winklejohn spoke, the Sparkler knew that he would have enemies in rear to deal with, to the full as vicious as the scoundrel he held lined just then.

So, not to waste time, nor run the risk of a backward glance, the Hercules leaped forward, grasping Sandoval with his free hand, lifting the Mexican clean of the ground and holding him as a partial shield to his own person, while taking in the odds against himself.

He saw Pablo Zarate, revolver in hand, while, close behind him, came a tall redskin, armed with an ugly-looking knife, both ready for bloody work, yet just as plainly disconcerted by that swift and unexpected movement on the part of their intended victim.

Sandoval struggled savagely, the weapon in his wildly grating hand discharging itself harmless as he howled forth curses and inarticulate directions for his comrades in crime; but Sparkler Sam did not grant them time for rallying.

Dropping his revolver for the moment, he brought both hands into full play, heaving the Mexican bandit above his head, then hurling him with terrible force squarely against his amazed mates!

That living catapult swept all before it, and the evil trio went down in a confused heap together, lifting a little cloud of dust and fairly turning the atmosphere blue with characteristic curses.

But, the Sparkler waited neither to hear nor to see further. Catching up the pistol he had let fall for the moment, and thrusting it into his plaided sash, he snatched up the cowering maiden and ran with marvelous swiftness away from the spot, turning around the nearest house and making it a shield against possible bullets, for the time being.

This was taking far more trouble than he would have deemed necessary had he only himself to care for; but, odd though it surely was that Georgia Winklejohn should be found in such evil company, at such an hour of the day, the Sparkler thought it wisest, if not kindest to hurry her off the scene before that shot or those vicious cries could attract a curious crowd to the spot.

With that his main object, then, the Gold-lace Sport had added not a little to his own peril rather than shoot to kill or to cripple. And still keeping that end in view, he hurried on, carrying the young woman much as another man might have borne an infant, paying little attention to the course he was taking at first, content if he might win clear of the row without encountering any of the citizens.

In this hope he succeeded beyond his

utmost expectations, and not a little to his gratification he recognized the building rented by Julius Winklejohn, only a short distance ahead, although he had come upon it from rear instead of front.

A few of his long strides carried them to the back door, where he paused short, letting down his fair burden, though still lending the support she sorely needed.

"Beg your pardon if I handled you a bit roughly, Miss Winklejohn," he said, in an off-hand apology as those brown eyes lifted to his face. "But, there wasn't much time to waste on ceremony, and so—"

He broke off abruptly, flushing hotly, for Georgia caught his strong hand between hers, then let fall a trembling kiss upon it!

"Don't! For heaven's sake—"

"How can I thank you, sir?" tremulously murmured the young woman, looking at him through her tears, looking so marvelously like "the Kid," too! "Only for your coming—that dreadful man who—oh, I thought I should die!"

"Then you wasn't—you didn't go willingly?"

The young woman shrunk away with a look of blended horror, reproach and resentment, all so natural that the Sparkler knew he had made a vast mistake, so far as Miss Winklejohn was concerned.

"Beg your pardon if my tongue got the best of me," was his ready apology. "But, your uncle called Sandoval friend, and got hot under the collar when I took the liberty of warning him against the cur. And so, you see, when I found you two together—"

"He caught me off my guard, sir, and carried me off in spite of all I could do," hurriedly explained the maiden, flushing warmly beneath that keen and steady gaze "I never liked him, but—"

"You'd better like a rattlesnake than Diego Sandoval, Miss Winklejohn, even though your uncle and cousin may regard him as a friend. A more vicious, reckless, utterly evil and worthless whelp of Satan never cursed this footstool! And—but I reckon I've said heap-plenty."

"If you would only say more, sir!" impulsively cried the maiden, one hand timidly going out to touch his nearest arm as she added in tones barely audible to those keen ears: "Please come inside, sir!"

Sparkler Sam shook his head, though a peculiar glitter came into his big blue eyes.

"I don't reckon I'd better, Miss Winklejohn. Your uncle—"

"Has gone out, and Cousin Edgar has gone with him," hurriedly explained Georgia; and adding in less clear tones: "I wish—if you would only tell me more about—about Mr. Leonard, sir!"

The Sparkler looked grave enough, now, and his tones sounded far less genial when he made reply:

"Surely you can't feel any human interest in poor Aus. Leonard, Miss Winklejohn! You, who drove him to—well, maybe I'd better not let my tongue have free rein, seeing it's a woman I'm talking to!"

Georgia was pale as a corpse, now, but she spoke in firmer tones than at first.

"It is as a woman that I ask you to step inside, where we can talk with less fear of interruption, Mr. Sampson."

"You know my name, then?" in well-feigned surprise.

"Yes. I heard you speak of it when uncle—I was listening just outside the door," gravely confessed the young woman, turning and entering the house, in which action she was imitated by the Sport.

He had his own reasons for yielding, and nothing could have pleased him better than that very request.

Seated together in the room where Edgar Winklejohn had again come to grief at the hands of the big fellow, a brief, but awkward silence reigned.

The Sparkler was in no haste to break the silence. This interview was not of his own seeking, although he had given some thought to just such an opening, and he was well content to give the young lady her own way for the present.

He could not help seeing that she was strongly embarrassed, or was trying to fight back some other powerful emotion, but he felt naught of pity, naught of sympathy, despite her rare beauty of face and charms of person.

After a few moments, Georgia Winklejohn spoke hurriedly:

"I have much to thank you for, Mr. Sampson, but I hardly know how to put my gratitude into words."

"Well, why not let it go for what it's worth?" blantly suggested the Gold-lace Sport. "I never did like thanks, and yours—well, somehow, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, just to think of it!"

The young woman flushed, then grew pale again. Her head dropped, and her tones were tinged with sadness as she answered;

"I can understand that, sir, thinking as you do; but let me explain what happened—that miserable wretch!"

"I had a miserable headache; something I had heard caused it, perhaps! Anyway, I left this house soon after uncle and cousin went away, thinking a breath of fresh air might do me good."

"I never once dreamed of incurring peril by so acting; how should I? But—that execrable villain crept upon me unawares, and before I could cry out, or even attempt to flee, he had me helpless in his arms, and bearing me away to—what?"

"Well, to no good, you can lay your last ducat, miss!"

"Then I contrived to free my lips far enough to call aloud for help, although he swore he'd murder me if I did so! And then—you came up, and—all the rest!"

Georgia bowed her head and covered face with hands, shivering like one with a severe chill.

The Sparkler remained silent. Although he had much to say, the time was not exactly ripe, although he felt confident it could not be delayed much longer.

And he was right in his guess, as the next moment proved, for suddenly lifting her head and gazing imploringly into his gravely-composed face, Georgia spoke:

"Tell me about—about your friend, Austin Leonard, sir!"

Sampson arched brows in counterfeit surprise, then asked:

"Pray, ma'am, who told you Aus. Leonard was my friend?"

"I heard—I was listening at the door through nearly all," the maiden again confessed, flushing warmly, only to have her color fade again as powerful grief dimmed her eyes. "Please tell me about—How did he die, sir? If you only knew—"

"You knew him, then?" pitilessly experimented Sampson, a malicious glitter filling his eyes, as he watched her changing features. "Was he ever anything more than an ordinary, every-day friend of yours, pray?"

A look of agony came into her grief-stricken face, and tears dimmed her sight. She was suffering as only a woman of a strong, passionate nature can suffer; but, even now, the Texan felt scant pity, and less sympathy.

If she suffered now, just so she had made another true heart suffer in the days gone by!

For a brief space that bitter struggle lasted; then pride gave way, and she again spoke:

"He was more than friend—he was all the world to me, then! And now you say he is—how did he—did he die, sir?"

"Die?" echoed Sparkler Sam. "Who said he had died? And when?"

"I heard you say that he was—was dead!" faltered the bewildered maiden, hands tightly clasping her throbbing temples.

The Sparkler gave a little chuckle before adding:

"The keyhole must have stopped the rest, I reckon, Miss Winklejohn. Didn't I say poor Aus. was dead—in love?"

The woman flinched although from a cruel blow; but she rallied with wonderful nerve, forcing her lips to evenly pronounce the words:

"If I misunderstood you, sir, I beg pardon. Now, will you tell me more, please? Mr. Leonard was once a dear, dear friend, and so—"

Despite her heroic efforts, a quaver stole into her tones, and she broke off with an incomplete sentence rather than more openly betray her acute suffering.

"Well, there isn't so mighty much to tell, ma'am, which would interest a casual acquaintance of days long past and forgotten," maliciously added the Sport, resolved to press his little experiment to the end. "It

would take a whole Dictionary to tell of our friendship; how it was formed, how continued, how close and confidential it became in the end; but, this much I will say: never a man or woman had a truer, nobler, whiter friend than this same Austin Leonard!"

"I know—heaven pity me! how well I realize all that!" moaned the young woman, bowing face upon joined palms, yet adding: "Go on, I beg!"

"You're not fit to hear much more, I fear," more gently spoke the Sport, rising to his feet. "But, this much: if ever a man held a broken heart in his bosom when we first met, Austin Leonard was that poor devil!"

Georgia quickly lifted her face, a touch of indignation glowing through her tears as she cried:

"A broken heart! And yet—you pronounced him dead in love!"

The Sparkler gave an airy gesture before saying:

"Oh, that came later—heap-sight later, ma'am! And, besides, don't it take a hair of the dog to cure its bite? And so—but, that's all bosh! For many long days Austin Leonard sought death in any and all shapes, but sought it in vain!"

"He was too much of a man to take his own life, else he would have been dead and dust, long ere this! And now—but, you're faint, ma'am!"

He seemed about to lend a helping hand, but was waved back. Then the young woman spoke, with forced calmness:

"You have judged me wrongfully, Mr. Sampson; but let that pass. If the fates will that we ever meet again in the flesh, he shall learn how much more sinned against than sinning I have been! Until then—once more, sir, I give you heartfelt thanks for saving me from that detestable villain!"

"What shall I tell Austin when I next see him, Miss Winklejohn?" asked the Sparkler, after a brief and embarrassed pause.

"Give him my kindest wishes for his future happiness, and—but no!" with sudden fierceness. "She will console him! I am nothing! I am worse than nothing to your friend—with the broken heart!"

And she flung wide the front door, and Sparkler Sam meekly passed through!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPARKLER ON HIS MUSCLE.

THIS was hardly the sort of retreat the Gold-lace Sport expected to make, and already he began to have serious doubts as to the complete success of his little experiment.

None could have told as much, however, from his manner as he strode leisurely away from the house, those keen blue eyes taking account of everything within their range, his big, shapely hands resting with seeming carelessness upon his plaided hips.

In spite of that admirable nonchalance, Sparkler Sam was never more thoroughly on his guard, for he naturally expected Diego Sandoval and his ugly mates to at least attempt to play even, and common sense warned him that their next meeting could hardly help being marked with bloodshed.

But, nothing whatever indicated their proximity, and the big fellow strolled onward like one who has no more important end in view than the killing of time until the hour should strike for his evening meal.

Yet the Sport with a mission was doing some very busy thinking, just then, and the more he weighed the troublesome matter, the less thoroughly was he satisfied with the summing up.

After all, what had he gained by the venture?

Even supposing Georgia Winklejohn had heartlessly jilted his friend, Austin Leonard, in what respect had he bettered the case?

"Blamed if she didn't look like an injured angel, minus the wings!" formed a portion of his reflections during that aimless stroll. "Why didn't she whoop and yell, kick and cavort all over when I opened up my batteries?"

"Why didn't she rear up and fall all over herself in a tangle, and vow she never didn't but even if she did, he was all to blame and never a bit of shame to her own blessed self?"

"That's what a woman ought to have done if guilty; but she—and she is a woman, too, all over!"

Then Sparkler Sam thought of the friend whose champion he had assumed to be in this matter, and his genial brows clouded as he fell to wondering just how Austin Leonard would regard the little experiment he had been induced to make.

"He'll kick like a bay steer! Maybe he won't say so mighty much, but he'll look—and I'd rather kiss his gun than meet those eyes with that sort of look in 'em—I would, for an honest fact, now!"

Take it all in all, Sparkler Sam was a vast deal less content with himself than he had been an hour or so earlier; but, so far as outward semblance went, a jollier, gayer, more care-free individual never trod the blessed footstool than his own mother's son that day!

Finding scant profit in such disagreeable thoughts, the Sparkler cast them aside for the present, letting a vastly different memory take the place they had occupied; and now his smile was no counterfeit.

"Bless the little lady, anyhow!" his mental speech ran along. "I'd like to have the same chance all over again, with the dust out of my fool eyes, as they are now. Wouldn't I spread myself and play the handsome? Wouldn't I—well, one thing's dead certain: I'd never do myself dirt by calling her kid!"

There lay a sting which was still sharp enough to bring a hot wave of color to the cheeks of this Brobdingnagian Infant; and pausing for a brief space, Sampson swung foot backward and upward, going through the motions of kicking himself with all due gravity!

"There!" he ejaculated, drawing a long, free breath. "That's heap-sight better! Now I reckon I could enjoy a bit of broiled hummingbird and a pickled mosquito! Ho, for the hashery, Babe!"

The afternoon had fairly spent itself, and twilight was beginning to assert itself as the Gold-lace Sport shook off his absorbing thoughts with that self-inflicted penalty for idiocy, and with quickened appetite he turned in the direction of the Shamrock Hotel.

Through all that aimless stroll his eyes had kept keen watch and ward, but without seeing aught of Diego Sandoval or of the bandit's tools, Zarate and the Kickapoo buck.

Had they beaten a positive retreat, cowed by that bloodless defeat?

"Not likely!" the Sport answered his own query. "They've taken to cover, maybe, but they're looking for a chance to strike back. And, if the chance comes their way first, reckon I'll pay scot!"

What would have been an ugly thought for most men, only caused the Sparkler to smile genially.

Life without some such excitement would be utter stagnation, he fancied, and now, as ever, he knew his hands could guard his head.

That smile turned to an audible chuckle as the Sport came into fair view of the saloon run by Dennis Maloney, near which had happened the odd experience already detailed.

No crowd was now visible, although he knew a fair patronage might be looked for inside that building; but the Sport took note of yonder circle of prickly pears, flattened out and scattered somewhat by the wild struggles of Edgar Winklejohn.

"Dollars to cents he'll be scratching and cursing this day month!" chuckled the Sparkler, greeting the patch with an approving nod. "Good lads, every leaf o' ye! Give ye 'nother dose o' monkey-meat, if that blessed dille should cut up another shire like the last!"

Passing on, the Sport paused at the saloon entrance, flashing a keen glance over all therein, hands resting easily at his hips the while.

A vision of good humor he looked; yet, if the occasion had demanded such action, he would have proved a veritable cyclone of furious action!

But neither Sandoval nor his mates were present, and as Dennis Maloney scowled his recognition from his position behind the bar, Sparkler Sam advanced, genial as ever.

"Good luck to the bunch of ye, gentle-

men!" came his frank salutation. "And more power to your elbow, honest Denny. Faith, sor, an' Oi nivver fild more loike washin' the dust out av me thrapple thin Oi'm faalin' this same momint, begorra! Shling 'em out, Dinny! It's moy traate, b'ys, an' av ye don't all tumble over yez faate in yer hoory to be one av us, thin, it's me mither's son'll br'ake his harrut waapin' over the degeneration av—oh, come along, gentlemen! I've got a twist in my poor tongue that only poisoning in company will unkink!"

In jolly good humor was this invitation extended, and in like manner was it accepted; while even Maloney relaxed his wrinkled brows as he scattered his bar with glasses and dingy decanters.

Time enough for growling over past wrongs and insults when there was less bright prospects for paying business!

For all his thirst, the Sparkler claimed a scant portion for his share, and after barely moistening his lips with the "liquid damnation," he deftly tossed the rest over his shoulder without attracting particular notice to his wild extravagance.

It was a brisk and noisy bustle for a couple of minutes, for hardly one of those present but felt in duty bound to make allusion to the recent "circus," though delicacy confined their remarks to the absent Winklejohn, passing over the role so reluctantly filled by Maloney.

Then, too, hardly less interesting matter for talk and surmising was furnished by those as yet-unexplained pistol-shots; twice within a few hours the alarm had been given through burning powder, and just so often a satisfactory explanation was lacking.

Sparkler Sam promptly asserted his utter ignorance; and, genial though his manner was from start to finish, still the patrons of the Harp of Erin fell away, shortly, leaving the Sport and Maloney the only ones near the bar proper.

By this time the son of the Emerald Isle had regained his customary good nature judging from his smiles and words, although there was a hint of treachery lurking back of those little eyes.

"Ye're a devil on tin whaaals, sor!" he declared, after wiping the bar and discarding the damp rag which performed that duty, leaning his short and muscular arms upon the counter as he added: "A naater thrick Oi nivver saw in the whoole coorse av me loife, bedad!"

"Well, you set the ball to rolling, Denny, and I couldn't help but chip in," half-apologetically answered the Sport from Texas, his smile broadening as he recalled that ridiculous tableau. "Then you don't hold a grudge, Irish?"

"Howld a groodge? Me, is it, sor?"

"Well, you seemed rather hot under the collar, Denny, and I reckoned you really meant it when you swore to play even."

"Augh, mahn, dear!" with a sharp shrug and shake of his bald head. "Don't talk av it, thin! Me play aavin' is it? Sure, sor, Oi've hed play a-plinty to stay me stoomick foor tin waakes to coom!"

"That's hearty, pardner, and—put it there!" cried the Gold-lace Sport, as a hand shot across the bar, to be gingerly clasped by those fat fingers.

But, even while that pledge of amity was being ratified, Sampson saw something in those little twinkling orbs which warned him against treachery.

Smile and pledge as he might, Dennis Maloney had not forgiven the rough jest played at his expense, although he strove to deepen that impression by adding, confidently:

"Sure, mahn, dear, but Oi don't say Oi'd l'ave it pass me by so aisy av it wasn't foor wan t'ing: the foinc mahnner yez kicked the stoofin' oot o' that monkey-doodle, Winkly-jahn, sor!"

"You know him, then, Dennis?"

"Augh! divil a good doos Oi know av anny wan o' baape, sor! Faith, thin, didn't they coom hayer wid stoyle bigger thin a toorkey-gabblar sthickin' oot ahl over thim? Whooroo, an' who but us? Git oot o' the way, ye common divils, yez! Give us room to sprid the purthy tails av—ow-wow! An' didn't Oi show thim the way oot o' the dure they kem in, begorra? Ah-ha, yez bit Oi joost did, thin!"

All this passed with little notice, that rasping voice raising higher and those wild gesticulations increasing in like ratio, just as though the landlord of the Shamrock felt carried away by a sense of the slight put upon himself and his hostelry.

Or, did he merely wish to hold attention, to fix all eyes upon himself, just then?

The suspicion struck the Sparkler, for he fancied that vicious glow coming to those little eyes meant more than tongue was telling; but in no manner did he betray his thoughts, leaning lightly against the bar, one hand smoothing his golden mustaches.

Then, like one filled with the vanity of good-looks, the Sport took a little circular mirror from his pocket, holding it up as he twirled the ends of his mustache—which, of course was only a cunning feint to see what might be going on in his rear!

He caught a brief glimpse of two armed figures stealing his way, and, whirling on the instant, the Texan giant sprang forward with a mocking shout!

Zarate and the Indian, each clutching a keen-pointed knife which they had hoped to bury between those broad shoulders before their approach could be divined, were taken completely by surprise, instead.

A deft kick disarmed the Mexican, while the Kickapoo was grasped by the arm, a violent jerk and thrust combined sending the weapon back under the redskin's belt; and then, caught by the throat in a double grip which no common force could break, the knaves felt themselves jerked off their footing and sent around in a dizzy dance!

"Give us room according to our size, gentlemen!" warned the Gold-lace Sport as he began that wild waltz. "Clear the floor, for here we come, full of frolic and half-dead for lack of dancing! Hoof it down, ye miserable sinners! Sparkler Sam is running the ball, and it sha'n't cost ye a red cent to pay the fiddler! Whoop-ee! Who says we're not having heap big time?"

A confused scattering, a clear space provided, those helpless arms and legs whirling about in frantic contortions, the handsome Hercules holding his enemies at arms' length and playing them like puppets of straw; all made up a picture of wild life rarely equalled and never excelled.

For a score of seconds thus; then Sparkler Sam ceased his circling, giving those wretches a final shake before bumping their heads together with malicious force, as he spoke:

"Gaze upon the pretty dandy-jacks, gentlemen all! This is the second time this very day they've tried to stab me in the back! I'd really ought to kill them as poison serpents, but, they're only evil tools obeying a viler master, and until I can settle with him—take a walk, you miserable carrion!"

Rushing them outside the doorway, the Sparkler let go, only to draw back his booted foot and kick them, one after the other, half-way across the street!

And with cocked revolver in each hand, the Man from Texas planted his broad back against the front of the building crying out:

"Come and see me, all ye who fairly thirst for gore! Here I stand, fat, ragged and saucy! Open for business, though ye show up in white, black, red or yellow! Come and mount me now, or hold your peace forever after!"

CHAPTER IX.

SPARKLER SAM'S EVENING CALL.

THE Texas Samson was thoroughly aroused, now, and if ever challenge was uttered in stern earnest, this defiance filled the bill!

The two baffled knaves still lay as they had fallen after those tremendous kicks, though already scrambling to rise; but there was precious little fight left in them.

Sparkler Sam hardly gave them a thought, but he did expect shot from or assault by their master, Diego Sandoval, and mainly on his account was that fierce challenge issued.

But, the Mexican bandit failed to put in a prompt appearance, and as he saw the lesser villains crawling awkwardly away, fearing to actually arise, lest by so doing they invite a shot or other kicks, the Sparkler felt a vicious disappointment which found vent in words:

"Crawl away, ye crippled lizards! Wallow in the dust, as befits ye; but take this warning with ye: let Diego Sandoval do his

own dirty work hereafter, or you'll fare worse than a surfeit of boot-leather!"

The Mexican turned head for a savage glare backward as he reached the opposite corner, and, with a laugh, the Gold-lace Sport sent a bullet humming his way—so deftly calculated that it clipped an ear in passing, spurring Zarate to a frantic bound and howling curse of rage and pain combined!

With equal agility the Kickapoo brave imitated that leap, both villains vanishing from sight of those who now crowded the door of the saloon.

"Last call, everybody!" cried the Texan, still standing on guard and ready for stern business. "Come singly, or come in a heap! Yellow Diego for choice, but nobody barred as long as they're willing to take their chances with the Infant from Brobdingnag! Come, ye sinners! Come, ye chiefs! Come and mount me now while I'm in the humor!"

There was no acceptance of that fiercely-reckless defiance, and, waiting a full minute, Sparkler Sam lowered his revolvers, speaking in cold, measured tones:

"Just a few words in parting, gentlemen. Those knaves were hired to double-bank me, by Diego Sandoval, one of Juan Cortina's chosen 'lambs.' I have ample proof if necessary, but for now I'll merely say this: twice since noon those two whelps have tried to kill me, each time coming up behind my back!"

"People say the third time's the charm; so let it be. For, I give fair warning, if a third time ever comes 'round, I'll wipe those curs off the face of this fair earth, or they'll turn my toes up for all time!"

An approving chorus came from the witnesses, but quiet came in answer to that uplifted hand.

"One word further, gentlemen. If any of you happen to meet up with Diego Sandoval, tell him to keep all eyes open, for I'll shoot him on sight—human wolf that he is!"

Without waiting to hear the comments made on this grim announcement, Sparkler Sam belted his guns and moved calmly away to the hotel.

For reasons which were perfectly satisfactory to himself, the Gold-lace Sport kept his own room until after the brisk ringing of a tinny-sounding bell announced the readiness of supper; and when he entered the long, bare dining-room, it was with right hand resting on revolver butt.

It took only a single glance to assure him that Diego Sandoval was absent, but recent experience had made him distrustful of appearances, and he crossed the room to a small table, seating himself with back to wall, thus giving him a clear and unobstructed view of the entire room.

This alone indicated any uneasiness, for never a man of them all ate more heartily of the food provided, or seemed to more thoroughly enjoy the plentiful if rather rudely served feast.

Nothing whatever occurred to mar the pleasure of that busy half-hour, and after a leisurely use of a toothpick the Sparkler left his seat and the dining-room, passing upstairs to his bedchamber, seemingly unconscious of the curious and mainly admiring eyes which followed his movements until he was fairly lost to their view.

For a few minutes he remained seated upon the edge of his bed, busy with more thoughts than can be reproduced here.

He only thought of Diego Sandoval in connection with Julius Winklejohn, at first.

"What sort of game is the old gent trying to play, I wonder?" ran a portion of his marvelings. "How will he act when he learns what took place to-day? Will his friendship endure such a strain? Or—has he any reason for getting rid of the girl?"

It was a truly startling thought, and for a brief space Sparkler Sam seemed fairly electrified by it. Then sober reason came to the rescue, and he banished the idea, forthwith, as preposterous.

"Bah! That's foolish, Babe! Better think—what makes the two look so mightily alike? Give a couple more years to the kid—great Scott! Can't I even think to myself without playing the ass?"

As though simply disgusted with himself, the Gold-lace Sport rose to his feet with a vigorous shake of his massive shoulders, but mechanically made sure his wea-

pons were in readiness for an emergency, though nearly hidden from casual view by the slaken folds about his middle.

A brief hesitation, and he noiselessly opened his door, listening for a few moments to make sure the narrow corridor was empty; then he stepped out, to silently pass along to the head of the stairs, down which he passed with marvelous lightness, making never a sound which could call attention his way.

As so often is the case with Western hotels, particularly in small places, the stairs ended in a narrow hall, with a door directly opposite, opening upon the street.

By this means one could pass into or out of the hotel without going into a room or being seen from the bar or dining-room.

The Sparkler appeared well aware of this arrangement, and made the most of it.

For good and sufficient reasons he wished to escape unwelcome curiosity at that particular time.

He succeeded in leaving the hotel, as he believed, without notice, and keeping well in the shadows, he moved briskly off, through the early night.

He paused here and there for a guarded glance into lighted resorts where such men as Diego Sandoval might naturally be expected, but he saw nothing of the Mexican nor of his two evil tools.

And then—was it purely chance?—the Gold lace Sport found himself drawing nigh the humble home to which "the Kid" had guided him a few hours earlier!

And, oddly enough, Rhoda Maynard was standing in that same door, a warm blush rising to her temples as she recognized the giant, who took fresh courage from her innocent confusion, bowing low and coming nearer with friendly inquiries upon his lips.

Before the maiden could fairly answer, however, Mrs. Maynard put in an appearance, and begged Mr. Sampson to enter the house.

Almost before he knew it, the Sport was comfortably seated in an easy-chair, with Rhoda at a little distance, and her mother speaking with plainly forced composure:

"I'm afraid I acted very oddly, this afternoon, sir, but you mentioned a name which—a name which took me completely by surprise! May I ask—where you met the—gentleman you called—"

"Winklejohn?" supplied Sparkler Sam as her voice choked.

"Yes: Julian Winklejohn, I think you said?"

"Did I?" muttered the Gold-lace Sport, his brows wrinkling as he in vain strove to recall what he really had said. "If I said that, I made a mistake, ma'am. I should have said Julius, not Julian."

Widow Maynard gave a start and a low cry, turning even paler as a hand flew up to press tightly over her heart.

Rhoda sprang to her side, and Sparkler Sam rose to lend a helping hand; but the woman motioned them both away, drawing a card photograph from her bosom, holding it forth as she faintly spoke:

"Look, please, sir! Tell me—is this like the gentleman?"

Sampson leaned nearer, but the first keen glance convinced him that the error lay not with himself, for that picture represented a far different person than the tall, gaunt lawyer!

"This is a correct likeness of—" he began, and the Widow Maynard quickly completed the sentence, with the name:

"Julian Winklejohn, yes, sir! And you have seen him since—"

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I can't say that," gravely interposed the Sport, drawing back and lifting eyes to that agitated face. "You've got the two persons all mixed up. You say that represents Julian, but my Winklejohn distinctly told me his name was Julius, the uncle and guardian to Georgia Winklejohn, who looks so wondrously like— Ha!"

Again it seemed as though the widow would swoon, but once again she desperately rallied, faintly saying:

"No—I am better! But—I fear I must ask you to excuse me, sir, for I am—far from—strong, just now!"

The Sparkler promptly rose to his feet, fumbling with his hat and betraying an unwonted degree of emotion as he hurriedly spoke:

"If I might only be of some service to you, Mrs. Maynard! If I was only— Can't you play like I was your big boy, ma'am, just for once?"

A hot flush came into his face as he spoke, for, now they were out, the words sounded peculiarly; especially as, out of an eye-corner, he saw how divinely "the Kid" was blushing, likewise!

With a wan smile the widow thanked him, but showed no signs of welcoming his service, otherwise. And, feeling that he had again "put his foot in it," the Gold-lace Sport beat a retreat in confusion.

Was that the reason why Rhoda bore him company?

At all events, she did follow him to the door, and even passed the threshold, closing the door behind her, possibly to shut off the draught which might have seriously inconvenienced the invalid!

"You are not offended, sir?" timidly asked Rhoda, as she paused just under the moonlight. "Poor mother! She is so feeble, so weak! When she gains strength, she will fully appreciate your more than kind offer!"

"And you?" whispered Sparkler Sam, taking her hand between his big, honest palms, a strangely bright glow in his eyes, as they rested upon that charming face.

"I have now more to thank you for than ever," came the low, but clearly-caught answer, head slightly drooping, but hand making no very decided effort to withdraw.

"If I only knew how to express my heartfelt gratitude, sir, I think—"

"Don't you try it—don't you now!" hurriedly broke in the Gold-lace Sport, his own hands trembling to the full as much as hers. "Don't try that, for you're too awfully lovely right now for—I just can't help it—so there!"

It was more than hand that he saluted now, yet luck was against the big fellow for once, in a way.

Rhoda's head was drooping, and he was in too great haste to do the thing up properly; so his mustached lips merely touched her white forehead; then, abashed by his own temerity, the Sparkler dropped her hand and fled—yes, actually ran away!

It was an odd coincidence all the way through, come to think of it.

A kiss, a hasty retreat, and—a falling un-awares into deadly peril!

For, just as he fairly rounded the corner near which he had been assaulted by Edgar Winklejohn, that afternoon, Sparkler Sam was caught in the loop of a deftly-cast lariat, and, as the vicious pluck followed, he went swiftly down.

CHAPTER X.

LIKE FATHER LIKE SON.

THE first few sentences which passed between father and son after the Gold-lace Sport made his masterly retreat, would hardly read well if placed in type.

The elder Winklejohn blamed his son for introducing such a person without warning, for there was no telling what harm he might have wrought through reviving memory of buried days.

Edgar gave a far from dutiful sneer at that, and doubtless would have spoken far more plainly, only for a swift gesture made by his sire.

A warning glance toward the closed door pointed this signal, and the two men deftly drifted into more harmless channels for the time being.

Still, since the matter had been revived, neither man was content to let it drop without coming to a more perfect understanding; and shortly afterward Julius Winklejohn made a point to let Georgia know he would be absent from home for an hour or so, on business.

Father and son left the house in company, and it was purely chance that led them in one direction while Sparkler Sam had taken the opposite; for their sole object now was to reach some spot where they might talk freely yet without dread of being eaves-dropped.

But little was said so long as they were in the town, Edgar wearing a sullen expression, while Julius was plainly troubled in no slight degree by what had so recently happened.

"Where did you stumble across that big bully, and what possessed you to run him in on me without a word of warning, son?" finally asked the elder Winklejohn, turning so as to stand face to face with his son.

"Why don't you hang out a sign, 'no callers wanted,' then? How was I to know that the fellow wasn't one of your elect? Surely he is a more reputable looking knave than the black-avised rascal we met coming out of the house, anyway!"

"If a friend of yours—"

"Don't call him friend of mine!"

"Well, I did thank it rather queer that you should pull a gun on a bosom-friend, but—"

"Why didn't you back me up, then? Why don't you spread your hand far enough to let me see at least one corner of your little scheme?" almost fiercely cried Edgar, right hand clinched and gesticulating. "If I am to be of any real service, surely I ought to know what wires you are pulling, and what had best be avoided?"

"If I haven't told you everything—"

"You haven't told me anything, rather! What started you off to Texas so suddenly? What makes Georgia so interested in this particular region, all at once? And—that Sandoval! Who is he?"

A faint, half-smile added another line or two to the wrinkles on the old lawyer's face, but after a brief hesitation he made reply:

"Well, for one thing, he is Senor Don Diego Sandoval, of good breed and high standing in his own country. For another, we met him two years ago, in society, when he fell deeply in love with your fair cousin, and—"

"What! I asked Georgia about him, and she declared she knew nothing whatever concerning the fellow, and cared less!"

Again that peculiar smile.

"Which you believed, of course?"

"Why shouldn't I believe it?"

"May others show a like credulity, pray I!" murmured the lawyer, with assumed devoutness. "When the sad hour comes which is to rob us both forever of that dear child, may all hands accept our statement as readily! I ask nothing better of fortune!"

Something in look rather than in tone or words impressed the younger Winklejohn, and after a quick glance around as though to make sure no one was playing the spy upon them, Edgar spoke again:

"You've said too much not to say more, gov'nor! What is it? Just what game are you getting ready to play, anyway?"

"A game in which you will lend a hand, of course?"

"You know it! And so I say: let me in on the ground-floor. I've been kept in the dark entirely too long as it is."

"Mainly because you were too far away for word of mouth, and such matters never ought to be set down in black and white."

"But since I joined you?"

"So far there has been nothing for you to do; but now—listen!"

"When your Uncle Julian died, he left everything to Georgia, by will, merely expressing a hope that, in case she felt the need of it, she would ask my advice before entering upon any important project."

"What! I thought you were her guardian?"

"No further than I am telling you, son," with a frown gathering his shaggy brows. "And I'm not so positive even that wish was not secretly qualified!"

"I don't understand you, sir."

"I wish I was as comfortably obtuse! But never mind. Now we've made a fair start, we can clear up all misty points at the one sitting."

"Although I have no positive evidence to that effect, it is my firm conviction that Julian left secret instructions for the girl, warning her against too implicitly trusting me, or you, either, for that matter!"

"What makes you think so?"

"A number of things, but one ought to suffice. If she felt full confidence in me, either as relative or guardian, do you think she would have decided upon a trip like this before even mentioning the matter to me?"

Edgar Winklejohn gave a start at that, changing color.

"Then you think she had other reason than those mines? Surely she is too proud to run after that fellow, Leonard?"

"And right there's where you played the idiot, sir!" sternly cried the lawyer, hand clinching and eyes glowing redly. "Why didn't you improve the golden opportunity when presented? Why didn't you court and marry her, out of hand?"

Edgar looked down at the ground, where his toe was digging a little trench. His shapely shoulders shrugged themselves, then he looked up, a sullen defiance reflected upon his countenance.

"Well, I suppose I might as well tell you, sir. The fact is I just couldn't marry Georgia, because—"

"Bah! Any fool could have won her then. A green girl, just out of school, with everything rose-colored before her! Why couldn't you marry her, pray?"

"For one thing, I already had a living wife, sir," coolly answered the younger Winklejohn, a grim smile playing about his mustached lips as he took note of that surprised start and expression.

"A living wife!" echoed Mr. Winklejohn.

"But living no longer, please the pigs!" devoutly ejaculated Edgar, flinging out one hand in characteristic gesture. "Let it drop, if you please, sir," his tones growing hard and forbidding. "Cursing breaks no bones, and whip me you daren't! She is dead, and let the past help fill the same grave. You will if you're wise."

But the father was just rallying from the heavy shock, and cried:

"What! A living wife! And you—Oh, you double-distilled idiot! Just when everything was working your way, and—"

"That's all right, gov'nor," came the cool interruption. "She's no longer living, and in going has left no sign behind her. Only for my own admission, you never would have been any the wiser; and what I've just told you, no other mortal shall ever hear from lips of mine."

"And now, business! I'll make Georgia my wife to-morrow morning, if you can only win her consent to such a sacrifice!"

Julius Winklejohn shook his head, doubtfully.

"I wish I could; 'twould be safer than—than the other way!"

"By other way you mean—what?"

No answer in words, but their eyes met and read each other for a few seconds. Then Edgar looked down at the little trench his toes were digging, evidently thinking over what he had seen in those eyes.

Presently he looked up, to slowly speak:

"I really believe I can turn the trick, gov'nor. Give me time; give me another week to do the courting act, and I'll answer for her consent!"

Julius shook his head, reluctantly.

"I'd do that gladly, if I only knew it was safe!" he muttered, after a brief pause for thought.

"How, safe?"

Winklejohn turned away without an immediate reply. Edgar said nothing, just then, for he knew an answer would come in due time.

The old lawyer was troubled in mind, that was plain to be seen.

That mental argument did not last long, and again facing his son, Julius Winklejohn cast a little more light upon the subject.

"You never saw the will itself, Edgar, but I did, and made it a close study, too, as was perfectly natural. I told you it contained mention of certain valuable mining property, I believe?"

"Yes. Down this way, wasn't it?"

"It declared the property was valuable, and certain to become still more so, in course of time. But—mark this, son!—it never told where those mines were located!"

"But I thought— Surely Georgia said—"

"That the mining property lay down this way—exactly. But tell me, will you, how did she gain her information?"

"You say it wasn't in the body of the will?"

"Nor in any codicil attached. Nor in any papers which I have been able to discover since Julian died. Yet—she says the property is located in this quarter! Now—where does she get her information?"

"Maybe he told her, by word of mouth?"

"Hardly that, since they had not met for more than a year before he died; you know that, surely?"

"I know he was away, but—well, what do you make out of it, then?"

"There is only one deduction to be drawn, and that is this: Julian gave the girl secret instructions, and with them must have come directions how to find these mines or mining property."

"Well, he always was a close old rascal!" coarsely declared Edgar.

"I wouldn't care for that; but, don't you see? If he took so many precautions against letting me into the secrets, doesn't that go to show he suspected me of designs upon his property?"

"Suspicion isn't proof, luckily."

"No, but it may be turned to just as great a disadvantage," moodily muttered the elder Winklejohn, thumb and finger pinching his thin lips. "If the girl has been put on guard against me, don't you see?"

"But, has she? If so, would she consent to letting you exercise even a nominal guardianship?"

"If not, would she keep everything so secret? What has she told me, so far? Nothing more than that important business demanded her immediate attention down here in the wilds of Texas!"

Edgar gave a little toss of his black curls, then spoke with real or admirably affected carelessness:

"Well, what matter the reason, so long as the fact remains, gov'nor? I'd rather have her down here in this benighted region, than at home, surrounded by family friends who would be dead sure to kick against even the ghost of foul play. Now, here, it's different! Should aught happen to the girl—and there is something going to happen?"

Julius Winklejohn flashed a keen look around, then whispered:

"I'm afraid there will—yes, I really fear for the poor child!"

CHAPTER XI.

A PRECIOUS PAIR OF PLOTTERS.

THEIR eyes met, and the knaves laughed in unison.

A joke seemed hidden under those words so gravely uttered, but neither father nor son cared to read the riddle more plainly, just then.

"Maybe it's all turning for the best," said the elder Winklejohn, after a brief silence.

"But if you could only realize how much success means to me! If you had even the slightest idea of all my pains, my plotting, my scheming to win this rich prize! But—how can you?"

"I'm in with you now, at all events, gov'nor; in with you up to my eyelids!"

"While I was planning and plotting toward this end, all for you, since I have no other heir or claimant! While I was doing this, you were doing all you could to ruin my hopes!" bitterly exclaimed the lawyer.

"Let a sleeping dog lie, gov'nor!" grimly warned his dutiful son. "I've made a clean breast of it all, now, and stand ready to make what amends lie in my power. Better have me to help then to hinder, don't you reckon?"

Julius flushed a bit at this thinly veiled threat, but deemed it the part of wisdom to let it pass by without mention.

After a brief silence during which he seemed to be collecting or arranging his thoughts, he spoke again:

"As I said, Edgar, I've been thinking of all this for years past, and only biding my time until I could make my blows count as they fell."

"In spite of your curious indifference—I can comprehend it far better, now—I still clung to the hope that you would make all easy by marrying the girl—and her fortune!"

"I'll do it now, with thank you in the bargain," grimly joked the young man.

"I fear that solution is impossible, but we'll see. Meanwhile let me show you a bit of the trouble I've put myself to."

"You know how Julian lived: wandering far and wide, making only brief and widely separated visits to the old home. And you also know that Georgia, after school, was kept at her studies in college."

"Of course I know. Let that part of it pass."

"She was just eighteen years of age when she finally left college, and if you had met her then—"

"But I didn't, for a very good reason."

"Another man did, worse luck!"

"Austin Leonard, of course?"

"Yes. He was just the sort of fellow to catch her fancy, and I believe 'twas a case of love at first sight."

"What a pity the serpent was permitted to enter their Eden! How did you manage it, anyway?"

"By employing pretty much the same arts a serpent would have used, no doubt," came the dry retort. "Where both lover and sweetheart are proud and high-spirited, it's no difficult matter to effect a breach between; and I was playing for a fortune, remember!"

"In plainer words, you lied to first one and then the other?"

"Let it go at that if you prefer the term," coolly. "A man is a fool who lets a sentiment balk him where a fortune is at stake! And I was lying for you, as well as for myself, remember!"

With a half-sneer in his tones, Edgar complimented the elder Winklejohn on his knavery, declaring him an ornament to the profession, and a shining light in general.

"Why, sir, I used to think I was no slouch! I'm no angel, to put it mildly, but you—"

"Just as certainly am no fool," coolly cut in the lawyer-guardian, showing his teeth in a silent grin. "As a matter of course I can and do wear the mask with the best of them; but in minutes like these—"

"'Twould be time and talent wasted, you think? Well, I reckon you're more than half right, gov'nor; and so—compliments aside, you did a mighty good piece of work in separating the lovers. Curse Leonard! What license has he to pick such a plum?"

"A plum that you despised, remember!"

"Don't bother about remembering anything of the sort, gov'nor. And now, not to change the subject at all, but what about this Greaser?"

"Diego Sandoval, you mean?"

"Of course! What is he? In earnest, not in romance."

Julius Winklejohn gave a brief chuckle. His armor was proof against such trifling pricks, and this blunt insolence of his son actually seemed to please rather than annoy him.

"You've heard talk of 'Cortina's lambs' since coming down here, haven't you?"

Edgar nodded assent.

"Well, Sandoval belongs to that outfit. He declares himself Cortina's right hand—vows he holds a regular commission as captain in the Mexican service; but you can swallow as much of that as pleases you."

"His looks are enough to hang him!"

"And I'm willing to go ball he is just as good as his looks," said Winklejohn, chuckling again. "To my belief he is a bandit, pure and simple, willing to slit a throat at a moment's notice for a dollar! And, situated as we are just now, what better recommendation could you ask than just that?"

Edgar shivered a bit as he met those keen eyes, then his own lowered as he surlily spoke:

"I can't agree with you, there, sir. He's too well known for safe treating with! That big bully, Sampson—"

"I know; he claimed to recognize Sandoval as one of Cortina's lambs, but what of that? We first met the Spanish gentleman thousands of miles away from here, moving in the best of society, and—"

"Really?"

"Do you think I'd lie about it, sir?" demanded Winklejohn with a portentous frown which matched oddly with his lips just then curling in a silent grin. "And, besides, who's to ask any such awkward questions, no matter how dreadfully we may be deceived by this Spanish gentleman?"

"That gold-lace rascal couldn't hold a still tongue if he should dislocate a jaw in trying!"

"How about a dislocated neck, or a dislocated heart?"

The younger schemer gave a start at that

slowly enunciated query, an evil glow leaping into his dark eyes as he looked at his father.

"You mean—what is it you do mean, sir?"

"That we'll be killing two birds with one stone, if all goes to my liking," coolly replied Julius. "As for the big knave, Sandoval himself told me the world is not large enough to contain them both, living. And when a fellow of his breeding says so much, you can confidently count on a serious accident befalling the object of his hatred!"

"Well, I'll hardly weep my eyes out over such an accident, but if it was to be anything like a fair shake, I'd lay odds against the Greaser. Of course, though, he means to take Sampson off his guard?"

"I should imagine so, yes."

"Well, good luck ride on his shoulder! And—Georgia?"

The answer to this question seemed less easy to find, but presently Julius Winklejohn made reply:

"Well, Edgar, the case stands pretty much like this: Sandoval already knew something about those mines; he declined to tell me just how far that knowledge extended, but he did make that admission."

"Well?"

"He says he'll take care of Georgia—"

"What?"

"He says he'll take care of the girl for sake of the mining property, and call it quits," steadily persisted Winklejohn.

As he himself had admitted, Edgar was far from being an angel, but he did revolt at this disposition of the fair, pure maiden.

"That devil? You surely can't mean to turn Georgia over to Diego Sandoval?" he almost fiercely cried, one hand gripping an arm with force sufficient to make the lawyer flinch.

But Julius Winklejohn was made of pretty tough metal himself, and instead of showing fear, he gave Edgar a flash of his yellow teeth, then sneeringly demanded:

"She would reform him, dear boy! And so long as she is not fair for you, what matter who else takes the management of her future?"

"But—that foul-souled villain!"

"Is just the sort of tool one must employ in cases of this description," sternly declared Winklejohn, freeing his arm and speaking with more authority than he had seen fit to display until now. "Would an honest man play so neatly into our hands? Would any lesser villain undertake to carry the girl off, and clear the way for our stepping into the Winklejohn fortune?"

"But how can it all be covered over?"

"Sandoval will carry Georgia off, over the border. Once there, what need we care how he treats her?"

"If we can cover our own tracks! How can you do that?"

"Easily enough. The girl has always been of a romantic disposition. She took it into her flighty head to elope with a suitor whom she had once rejected; isn't that simple enough?"

"Yes. Or would be, if Sandoval wasn't so like an infernal satyr!" quickly amended Edgar.

"Well, love laughs at looks as well as locks, sometimes; and this is one of those occasions."

"But, afterwards? How can we lay claim to her fortune?"

"As next-of-kin, to be sure!"

"But not while she is alive?"

"She will pine away and cross the river before many weeks," dryly prophesied the lawyer-guardian, his black eyes glittering evilly.

The young villain stood in silence for a full minute, evidently pondering the matter in his mind; but then he spoke, more decidedly:

"It's a nasty job, take it all through, gov'nor! A nasty job! And I ask for just one more chance with the girl. Let me try my hand at winning her fairly, father; I believe I can do it if I put my whole soul into the work!"

"But Sandoval—"

"What time has been set for his turning the trick?"

"None. He is to watch his chance, and carry her off whenever he can be certain of

success. I thought it safest, that way; then no man can point a finger of suspicion my way, for I'll be ignorant as the best of 'em!"

Julius gave a brief chuckle, but Edgar failed to join in.

He was chafing at the thought of letting his fair cousin fall into such thoroughly vile hands, seemingly forgetful of his own proven worthlessness.

"I'll have my chance over, and that's the whole of it, gov'nor!" he declared, firmly, even menacingly. "Choke that black-avised devil off, until I've had my try, anyway!"

"And if you fail?"

"Time enough for that when I do fail! I believe I can turn the trick, and if Georgia consents to marry me, surely that will be better than to—than the other way?"

"Yes, provided she yields; but time is precious, boy, as you ought to know after today! How long do you ask for?"

"A week at the outside, and I'll cut the time as much shorter as I may, without running too serious risk of losing all through haste."

"Very well; let it be so, then!"

CHAPTER XII.

SPARKLER SAM BREAKS THE CHARM.

NOTHING was further from the mind of the Gold-lace Sport than such a warm reception, but past experience stood him in good stead now, and on the instant he divined the worst.

The first touch of that snaky coil told him it came from the hand of a master, and that fighting fiercely against the silent death would only too surely hasten his end.

Instead of trying to either break away from or to cast off the *riata's* noose, he threw himself swiftly forward in the direction from whence that assault was made, at the same time grasping pistol-butt with right hand, while its mate flew up to lay close along face and throat.

The anticipated jerk came at that precise instant, but the sickening shock was greatly lessened by his prompt action, and a hoarse cry of angry triumph burst from his lips as his muscular fingers closed upon the plaited rawhide rope.

With that cry came a shot, lighting up the shadows with a lurid glare, giving the Gold-lace Sport a fleeting glimpse of his enemies.

Crack—crack—crack!

One fierce jerk tore wide that closing noose, and another brought the lariat-hurler staggering that way, while Sparkler Sam sprang to his feet, whipping forth a knife and severing the *riata* with one and the same motion.

"Chaw lead, ye devils!" he cried, savagely, sending the lasso-thrower reeling back with another shot. "Try to climb my back, will ye? Play circus with the Baby, eh? Ah-ha, ye imps o' darkness! Lie down—lie down and stay as I put ye!"

A single shot came from the *riata*-caster as he staggered back, but just as Sparkler Sam fired again at the knave, he fell all in a heap where the shadows lay densest, and not knowing how badly his remaining bullets might be needed by more dangerous foes, the Gold-lace Sport lost sight of him in the darkness.

All this took place with bewildering rapidity, but noise enough was made to alarm the town, and already excited shouts and cries could be heard as some of the citizens rushed forth from saloon or house to see what was the matter.

Sparkler Sam had no means of knowing just how strong a force had assailed him, and with back guarded from knife or bullet by the blank wall of a building, he made no effort to escape from that spot, lest still worse than notoriety might befall him.

He heard the rush of feet coming that way, and as he caught his first glimpse of human shapes both up and down the street, he gripped his weapons more firmly and called out in stern warning:

"Steady, gentlemen! Don't try to crowd the mourners, or somebody'll get hurt!"

"What's the row about, anyway?" sharply demanded one of the shadows.

"That's just what I'm anxious to find out my own self! Steady, I say! Crowd in before—Bring lights, or some of you will lose yours! I've been double-banked al-

ready, and I mean just what I say: cross the dead-line before there's light enough to read your title clear by, and I'll add to the graveyard census!"

An eager cry escaped from some one hidden by the gloom.

"Sparkler Sam! It's the Sport, or I'm a liar!"

"Sport or no Sport, don't let a single one slip ye by!" cut in a stern, authoritative voice an instant later. "Hold all as it is until we can see—fetch lights, boys!"

"That's all I'm asking, friends," declared Sparkler Sam, still keeping on his guard. "I've downed one or two of the p'izen imps, so mind where you plant your feet or you may feel their fangs!"

Even as he spoke the bright glow of hurrying lanterns became visible, and crowding himself into a little jog just beyond his left hand, Sampson eagerly swept the ground before him with his keen eyes.

Close to the corner he had been rounding when the vicious assault was made, he could distinguish a human figure lying, an ugly blot upon the earth just then!

A little nearer his own position the lariat-caster had fallen, and now a wave of the coming lights flashed across a single foot and part of a leg; the one shod in russet leather, the other glittering with silver buttons!

"Steady, gentlemen!" warned the Gold-lace Sport as the lantern-bearers came closer the spot. "Play me white, and I'll never do you dirt; but three times hand-running is heap plenty! I'm a new-born baby for meekness and humility, but when—"

"Steady yourself!" sternly cut in the citizen who had commanded the bringing of lanterns. "Who are you, and what does all this mean, anyway?"

"I'm Parker Sampson, sir, at your service," declared the Sport, stepping forth into fairer view, though he still gripped his ready revolvers.

Excited cries broke from other lips, just then, as the scene was for the first time fairly lighted up.

By the corner lay the motionless form of an Indian, fantastically garbed, while a bit further on was another body, just as surely that of a Mexican, if garb alone was to be considered.

Sparkler Sam took swift note of these points, and they merely served to confirm his belief that Diego Sandoval was playing to get even, either in person or through his evil tools alone.

"Look for yourselves, gentlemen!" he called out, sharply. "It was do or be done, and I hated to knock under to such riff-raff as— If Yellow Diego Sandoval is among ye, shove him to the front!"

These words came only when eyes failed, but if Sparkler Sam really hoped to end the feud that night, he was fated to be disappointed.

If the right-hand man of Juan Cortina was within reach of that voice, he certainly took good care not to answer it in person.

With lanterns at hand, the rest was quickly managed, and while one or two of the more prominent citizens kept both hands and eyes at liberty, others eagerly investigated the matter, little cries and ejaculations following the recognition of the Kickapoo and his more gaudily-garbed comrade in crime, Pablo Zarate.

A ghastly hole in the forehead of the red-skin only too plainly announced the manner of his death, and no effort was made so far to resurrect him.

But when they came to the Mexican, interest at once grew deeper, and cries went forth that Zarate was living still!

"So much the better!" grimly commented the Gold-lace Sport, taking advantage of the opportunity by deftly reloading his pistols. "Make him tell who set the pair of 'em upon my trail. I'm offering dollars to cents 'twas Yellow Diego, the cowardly whelp!"

Even without this urging, just such an effort would have been made, but now the wounded knave was eagerly questioned, even as his hurts were being investigated.

One bullet had torn its way through his face, splintering a couple of teeth and driving the fragments through the covering cheek, making an ugly but by no means mortal wound.

In addition to this, he had caught a

bullet in his left shoulder, breaking no bones but causing a profuse hemorrhage.

Groaning with mingled pain, fear and hatred, the Mexican shrunk away from the rough but not unkindly hands which lent him aid just then, giving a show of his wolfish teeth as Sparkler Sam came more distinctly within his limited range of vision.

"Make him tell who egged him on," coldly urged the Gold-lace Sport, at the same time keeping keenly upon the alert against a possible blow or shot from cover. "Ask him if Diego Sandoval was with them when they first jumped me from cover?"

Pablo Zarate caught his meaning, and gave a vicious curse as he tried to shrink further away from the man who had thrice baffled him that same day.

Instead of waiting to be questioned, he burst forth in a vicious flood of curses and oaths, then vowing by all the saints in the calendar that this thousand-fold accursed Gringo had been the assailant!

Sparkler Sam gave an ejaculation of indignant amaze as he heard this astonishing declaration, but Zarate stuck to it: he and his poor friend of the Kickapoo tribe had been innocently wandering along when this accursed giant jumped upon them without word of warning or shadow of excuse: jumped upon them from behind their backs, murdering them like so many innocent lambs!

"This looks like it, don't you think, gentlemen?" cut in the Gold-lace Sport, and as all eyes instinctively turned his way, he lifted the severed end of the braided raw-hide with revolver-barrel.

The noose was still around his neck, and by the glow of the lantern could be seen a red and swollen ridge where the lasso had dangerously compressed that massive throat.

This was evidence far more eloquent than tongue could offer, and as by magic arose the wild, fierce cry for vengeance: not from lips of Sparkler Sam, but from many who had never laid eyes upon him before that hour.

It was the terrible roar of lynch-law, and still with noose hanging over his broad shoulders, Sparkler Sam sprung to save the very life he had only a few brief minutes before sought to take!

Pistols in hand he stood across that cowering, moaning, shivering shape, ordering back the crowd under penalty of death, vowing that Pablo Zarate should have a fair shake for his life.

Cooler heads listened and steady hands came to back up this stern defender. First one, then a couple, after them others, until a full score influential citizens were defending the prisoner, and all danger of premature justice was averted.

Sparkler Sam urged that Zarate be placed in security, with an armed guard against further trouble, until the fellow could have a fair trial and be punished or set at liberty as his merits might prove.

This suggestion finally prevailed, and feeling fairly confident now that no further effort would be made to lynch the rascal, Sampson left the affair in other hands, shaking himself clear of the crowd and then making it a part of his journey bedward to pass by the house under whose roof he had located "the Kid!"

Did he expect what he found?

Whether or no, Rhoda was standing at the front door as the big fellow came by, and of course he had to stop for a moment to explain what had happened, together with the welcome fact that, barring a chafed neck, he was just as sound as ever!

Rhoda appeared very grateful to providence for this escape, and she must have been seriously agitated by the tragic sounds which had drawn her to the door, since she forgot to chide the big fellow for his recent audacity!

Sparkler Sam did not tarry long, for more reasons than one.

Believing as he did that Diego Sandoval had been at the bottom of this latest attempt upon his life, he dreaded calling attention toward this budding woman in whom he was growing to feel so powerful an interest, lest the vicious bandit strike at his enemy through this quarter.

Yet there was a bright smile playing

over his comely face as he passed on, and his big right hand was tingling deliciously under the faintest of all imaginable pressures!

Nevertheless Sparkler Sam kept keenly upon the alert while picking his way across to the Shamrock Hotel, rather more than half expecting Yellow Diego to jump forth from cover with knife-thrust or pistol-shot.

But nothing of the sort occurred, and the Sport reached the hotel without further adventure, entering by the narrow passage he had elected when leaving his chamber, reaching his room in the upper story without attracting attention so far as he could see.

Once safely behind closed doors, Sparkler Sam showed no particular haste in seeking repose, busy and trying though that day certainly had been.

And even after he went to bed, with one gun beneath his pillow and his pistol-belt hanging close by his head, he lay for a long time thinking over the events of that day: now of Sandoval and his tools, now of the Winklejohns and his absent friend, Austin Leonard; but oftenest of all did he think of Rhoda Maynard, his oddly-found "Little Kid!"

Of course 'twas rankest nonsense to even hint that the big fellow could be falling in love, but— Of course it was!

Just when the drowsy god prevailed, or how long his reign had lasted, Sparkler Sam never knew, even if he ever tried to guess; but asleep he surely had been, for he was scarcely awake when a series of startling sounds made him leap bodily to the middle of the floor.

Shots and shouts, whoops and yells, crashing blows and trampling of hoofs, all combined to fill the night air with thrilling confusion.

And then, shrill and far-reaching, he caught the cry:

"Cortina's Lambs! To arms! Cortina is raiding the town, men!"

A fierce oath burst from Sparkler Sam's lips at this, and with savage haste he jumped into his garments, buckling on his belt of arms as he left the chamber and tore down-stairs, eager to take a hand in the fight.

CHAPTER XIII.

SPARKLER SAM ON GUARD.

It took only a few seconds for the Gold-lace Sport to jump into his clothes and rush down-stairs to the level below; but even in that brief interval it seemed as though the fierce clamor had doubled in volume, if not in actual danger.

Pandemonium seemed turned loose in town.

Pistols and carbines were exploding here and there, yells, shouts, cries and vicious curses arose on every hand, while mad riders seemed thundering through the town from all points of the compass.

Not all of the wild confusion could be laid to the audacious raiders, however, for the startled citizens were adding to the bewildering tumult, only a few seeming to keep their heads in part.

From these arose that warning cry—a warning only too frequently rendered necessary in those troublous days by Juan Cortina, the famous—or infamous—Chaparral Wolf from across the Rio Grande.

Sparkler Sam caught sight of more than one swiftly-moving shape by the fairly-clear moonlight, but nothing plain enough to justify a shot, on his part.

Now and then a horseman flashed across his field of vision, but never giving clear or long enough view for identification, let suspicion be as strong as it might; and with all his rashness, Sparkler Sam was too shrewd to chance a shot which might strike down the innocent for the guilty.

For a few seconds he hesitated which way to turn first, but then another cry of "Cortina's Lambs" decided him, and breaking into a run he headed for the residence of the Winklejohns.

"Dollars to cents Sandoval will try it on again!" was the reflection which sent him forward in such hot haste.

There seemed good and sufficient grounds for that instinctive belief, too, as he came closer to his destination, for, even before he

could sight the spot, his ears warned him of trouble ahead.

Rushing around the corner, Sparkler Sam caught his breath sharply as he beheld several mounted men in front of the building, giving a low, fierce cry as he saw one of their number just reining his steed back to the door, then plying spurs viciously.

With each touch of the steel the horse lashed out fiercely with his heels, making that front door crack and groan before this novel assault.

There could be no doubting their intention, and giving one stern shout of warning, the Gold-lace Sport rushed forward, shooting as he ran.

With a shrill scream of mingled pain and rage, the rider flung up his arms, then toppled heavily out of the saddle as his horse broke away in mad flight.

Cries of startled anger broke from the other riders, and they came together as though the better to meet that reckless charge; but as Sparkler Sam came on, pistols barking venomously, with each long stride, the knaves seemed to lose nerve, for they wheeled and rode away at top speed, after firing a single volley.

The Infant from Brobdingnag could hear the ugly humming of their lead as the shots sped by, but he only laughed in reckless defiance, crying out at the top of his voice:

"Oh, come back! Come back, my darlings! 'Tis the Baby calls—'tis the weenty babe from Lilliput, mourning for his dinner of— Come back, ye runners from Skeedaddle-ville! Come back and all shall be forgiven ye unless— Do come back before I die of lonesomeness, now!"

Sparkler Sam was just as nimble with legs as active with tongue, and the final prayer was roared forth while he stood in front of that hoof-scarred door, back to the building and eyes strained after those fleeing desperadoes.

An instant later a shot was fired from the nearest window, and with a little cry the Gold-lace Sport sprung forward and to the right, for the bullet fairly broke the skin of his cheek, so narrowly did it miss his life!

He saw the little cloud of smoke veiling the window, and that set at rest all doubts as to where the shot had come from; but the sight awakened far from agreeable thoughts.

"Steady, you in there!" he called out sternly, at the same time bringing one of his pistols to bear upon the window. "Better save your bullets for enemies than waste them on friends, Winklejohn!"

No reply was made, either by way of apology or further menace, and with doubts deepening into suspicion, Sparkler Sam moved still more completely out of range of the windows, unless the careless marksman should actually thrust head or arm out through the opening.

Was it mere carelessness, though? Had he been mistaken for one of the knaves who so fiercely assaulted the front door?

Or—had he been recognized, and so shot at because recognized?

The Sport's face tingled with more than the smart of that bullet as his reflections took this turn; but that was hardly the hour in which to solve his ugly doubts, and standing on guard against both open and hidden enemies, he waited, guns in hand.

That was a stirring ten minutes or more, although neither foot nor horsemen came in to that particular street.

The town seemed fairly alive with raiders, one and all of whom appeared bent on splitting the night air with the most outrageous sounds possible for human lungs to shape, while the report of guns and pistols added a spice of danger to the wild tumult.

There appeared to be no particular point for assault, and the whole affair reminded Sparkler Sam of a crowd of drink-inspired cowboys, trying to "take the town," rather than one of those bloody raids so common during the reign of Juan Cortina and his terrible Lambs.

Then, almost as abruptly as it had burst forth, the wild uproar ceased; in a single minute all was stilled, and not even a hoof-stroke could be heard longer!

By this time Sparkler Sam felt fairly well convinced that this raid meant far more than he at first believed; the abduction of Georgia Winklejohn; and satisfied that no further peril menaced the maiden from that quar-

ter, at least, he swiftly left the spot, hurrying away to learn just what damage had been done.

With the whole town so thoroughly excited, it was no easy matter to get at the actual facts; but partly guided by instinct, Sparkler Sam came out near the rude stone building which served as town calaboose, there to find an angry, grieving assembly.

"I knew it!" he muttered with a black frown as he strode forward.

The heavy plank was shattered and its hinges bent, the lock plainly broken by gunshot; but that was not the worst.

Lying in the moonlight was a human shape, and as Sparkler Sam came forward, way was silently made for him.

He bent over to recognize the man who had warned him of the plot against his life: Tom Billson!

The calaboose was empty, now, and this, the volunteer guard, had been brutally assassinated by the ones who had burst open the jail and rescued the wounded assassin, Pablo Zarate!

This proved to be the only actual fatality, so far as the citizens were concerned, although several men had been more or less severely wounded by the reckless firing kept up during those few minutes, mainly, as it now appeared, to cover over the rescue of the wounded Mexican.

Not until after this was ascertained, and he heard the citizens wondering whether or no the raid had actually been inspired by the Chaparral Wolf, that Sparkler Sam remembered the fellow who had dropped at his shots while assaulting the Winklejohn door.

When he mentioned this fact, a pretty general rush was made for that quarter of the town, and the body was soon after under inspection.

Both garb and features sufficiently proclaimed his nationality, but there was further proof forthcoming: two different persons fully recognized and identified the fellow, both declaring him to be a half-breed Mexican, and a member of Cortina's lawless aggregation of cut-throats.

Reassured by the crowd, the Winklejohns came forth, expressing their thankfulness that matters were no worse, but declaring their inability to cast any light upon the matter.

In all probability that assault was merely part of the cunning plan to divert attention from the real point of attack, chance alone determining the door they should assail.

So said Julius Winklejohn, but Sparkler Sam thought differently.

Still he kept those doubts to himself. Why should he speak? Even though he felt morally sure Diego Sandoval was at the bottom of it all, how could he make others see through his eyes?

Now Tom Billson was dead, he had no one to back up his words, and he deemed it only the part of prudence to wait for a fairer opening.

All this took time, of course, but the first glimmer of dawn had not yet made its appearance, when a strong force was organized, and by the aid of lanterns the trail of the raiders was sought and found.

Just as they had spread themselves all over town in order to increase the confusion and add to the chances of success through demoralizing the citizens, just so the retreat had commenced, each man acting as though independent of all others, and thus leaving a multiplicity of trails to confuse and bother those who might attempt to follow.

But Sparkler Sam was not long in divining this trick, and taking one of the trails which headed most directly for the river, he stuck to it through thick and thin, never giving over until the scattered spoors one after another joined that particular track, all leading down to a lonely but safe ford. And pointing across the Rio Grande, the Gold-lace Sport grimly spoke:

"I fancy that tells the tale plain enough, gentlemen! Find Juan Cortina, and you'll find the wolf who set up such a howling last night. I'd say come and find him, but—can we whip all Mexico?"

CHAPTER XIV.

SPARKLER SAM GIVES WARNING.

THAT was a self-evident fact, and while curses against the raiders were loud and deep,

no one was over-eager to press the chase home to those unknown fastnesses beyond the dividing river.

As Sparkler Sam said, that would involve fighting the entire people of Mexico, never more willing to resort to arms than while defending a right they themselves have always ignored.

There was nothing to be seen of the raiders, and only the vanishing trail to prove that they had passed this way; but never a man among all the searchers for an instant doubted the truth; whether Cortina's Lambs or less notorious cut-throats, the raiders surely had sprung from Mexican soil, and unto Mexican bounds they had retreated.

Slowly, reluctantly the citizens retired, empty-handed as they had come, but Sparkler Sam did not keep with the main crowd.

Satisfied that his surmises had been correct, and knowing that all thought of further chase would be worse than useless under existing circumstances, he was among the first to turn away from the river and retrace his steps to town.

Ever since taking the trail, Sampson had been remarkably quiet and reticent for him, and his face wore signs of deep, if not altogether pleasant thoughts as he once more drew near the town.

"There's heap sight more in this little racket than shows on the face of it," the Gold-lace Sport reasoned to himself. "It wasn't just a happenstance that made my yellow duck elect that front door for his heel practice! And—dollars to cents it wasn't an accident that gave me this little beauty-mark, either!"

With tip of finger the Sport touched his lightly-scarred cheek, a frown wrinkling his brows as he recalled how narrowly the lead had missed ringing his death-knell.

In all probability this reflection had something to do with his movements after returning to town, but no one who saw the gallantly-arrayed Sport as he paused in front of that heel-marred door, to briskly tap a panel with his gloved fingers, would have taken him for an enemy, or anything less than a very intimate friend of the inhabitants.

That summons was not responded to as quickly as Sparkler Sam considered it ought, and as his keen ears caught a sound at the window from whence that shot had been sped, he turned knob and briskly entered, doffing hat to salute Miss Winklejohn, upon whose trim figure his gaze was first to fall.

"Your obedient, ma'am! And—beg pardon, my dear sir," turning quickly to his left as a half-smothered exclamation came from that direction, and duplicating the bow for the benefit of Julius Winklejohn as that gentleman turned from the window. "Hope I see you well, sir? May I hope your state of health is none the worse for the little disturbance of the past night, sir?"

"I don't—What is your business here, sir?" bluntly demanded the old lawyer, frowning portentously.

"Thanks; don't care if I do take a chair," coolly said the Gold-lace Sport, sinking gracefully into a convenient seat, crossing his legs and capping knee with his snake-ornamented hat, all the while smiling blandly. "It's a pleasure to call upon such a perfect gentleman as yourself, Mr. Winklejohn! So kind, so polite, so full of thoughtfulness for—Ahem!"

Something very like an oath found birth in that legal throat, just then, although it was nearly smothered before passing those thin lips.

Georgia smiled, and Sparkler Sam laughed in tune. Just then he preferred keeping in her good graces than in the good books of the gaunt guardian.

Still, the Sport found it far easier to talk to this young lady than he had to his "Little Kid," and for the next few minutes he paid no attention to the lawyer, chatting easily to Georgia, mainly about the recent stirring events.

The young lady appeared somewhat embarrassed, but Sparkler Sam gave that no heed. He had come there with a double object in view, one of which was to let fall a warning for the girl's especial benefit, and now he was trying to wear Julius Winklejohn out, or disgust him into leaving the room for a brief space.

But that hope was never realized, and at

length recognizing the futility of his scheme, Sparkler Sam turned abruptly toward the man, saying:

"I'm not so positive you will thank me or the warning, sir, but all the same, here is: beware of Diego Sandoval! Of course you know he led the raid, last night?"

Winklejohn seemed slightly taken aback by this blunt speech, but rallying quickly, he coldly retorted:

"How do you know that, sir?"

"The town is full of witnesses, sir, if that is what you mean. I doubt if you can find a man to-day who doubts what I'm telling you now. And I hoped to bring forward proof ample enough to convince even you of Yellow Diego's guilt, but Sandoval played his best trump when he run off Pablo Zarate!"

Sparkler Sam watched his man closely all the while, but he failed to see aught which would confirm his ugly suspicions.

Coldly the lawyer listened, and still more coldly he spoke in turn:

"Although I can see no reason why I should make you my confidant, Mr. Sampson, I will say this much: I have no expectation of seeing Don Diego Sandoval again, shortly or otherwise. He was a passing acquaintance, merely, as my niece can bear witness. Am I right, Georgia?"

The young lady bowed assent, and her guardian added:

"Having said this much, sir, I believe I have said all—and even more than—you have any right to expect. And now—is this the full extent of your business, Mr. Sampson?"

As he spoke, he reached a hand in the direction of the front door, but Sparkler Sam was not quite ready to accept the hint, it seemed.

"Thanks, my dear sir: just as many thanks as your rare courtesy and exquisite sense of truth so richly merit!" the Sport said, with a half-mocking bow, then turning toward the young lady, with: "I would like a word or two with you, Miss Winklejohn, if I may presume so far?"

"It is worse than presumption, sir!" angrily flashed forth the old lawyer before Georgia could answer. "I protest against—"

Georgia lifted a hand in silent admonition, then swiftly left the room, to return a very few seconds, bonnet in hand and a faint smile lighting up her really beautiful face.

Without so much as glancing toward her frowning guardian, the maiden spoke to the Gold-lace Sport:

"May I ask you to act as my escort for a little walk, Mr. Sampson? I begin to fear life is not so safe in this region, after all!"

"Georgia!"

"With all the pleasure in life, Miss Winklejohn!" declared the Gold-lace Sport, already upon his feet, hat in hand.

Just one flash from those big brown eyes and Julius Winklejohn let drop the sinewy hand which was reaching forth to check her movements; then the young lady passed through the doorway, leaving the house behind without a glance, gracefully accepting the escort she had so bravely asked for.

As interference was thus left behind, a flush crept into that charming face, and Sparkler Sam felt her little hand tremble as it lightly rested upon his arm.

With quick intelligence he divined the truth, and spoke, gravely:

"My heartiest thanks are your due, Miss Winklejohn, for helping me out of an awkward situation. I felt that I must say a word or two to you in private, since I am going away; but as Mr. Winklejohn felt indisposed to withdraw, I was at a loss to act when you so kindly came to the rescue."

"I surely owe you no less, after—after last evening, sir," lowly spoke the maiden, face and eyes drooping as her color faded.

"Don't mention it, I beg of you, ma'am," more cheerily cried the Sport as they walked along the nearly deserted street, heading toward the portion of town where Widow Maynard held her residence. "That was simply sport to a man of my training, and I'd ask nothing better of life than to have just a little circus every day that comes 'round!"

Georgia gave a little shiver as her brown eyes glanced around them. She seemed expecting another attack, but of enemies there

were none in sight, and gathering fresh courage she ventured to ask:

"You think of leaving, sir? And you wished— You have something more to say to me, I understand?"

Sparkler Sam gave a slight start just then. They were passing in front of the house where "Little Kid" lived, and he caught a brief glimpse of a woman's face at the window: was it that of Rhoda Maynard?

"I am going away, yes, ma'am," he hastened to explain, taking the next turn and quickening his pace a little like one who feels anxious to get a disagreeable task over. "I expect to see my friend, Austin Leonard, ere long, and merely wondered if you had any message you would like me to bear him?"

The young woman flinched visibly for an instant, but as quickly rallied, walking swiftly on in silence for a minute or more.

Sparkler Sam was willing to wait, knowing right well that his answer would come before their destination was reached. And he was correct in his belief.

"No, sir," presently spoke the maiden, her tones low and hurried, but without a tremor so far as his keen ears could determine. "I have no message to send to your friend, Mr. Leonard. Only—when you meet him, you may say this much: if ever our paths cross if fate wills that he and I shall ever again come face to face this side of the river: if that day ever dawns, then he shall know how much more sinned against than sinning I have been in days gone by!"

Sparkler Sam listened intently as that musical voice grew lower and less distinct, but at the final word a half-frown came over his face, for he had counted on something more definite than this.

"Only that? You can say nothing more, Miss Winklejohn?" he mused.

"Nothing more, sir! And—don't press me, else I may regret having said even so much!"

A swift rush of color came into her face, and she hurried forward like one eager to seek a refuge. The house was now in sight, and knowing he had but a few seconds left, Sparkler Sam spoke swiftly:

"Thanks for so much, then! And now—listen, please! Beware of Diego Sandoval! He's all evil, he's thoroughly bad, and never drew an honest breath in all his life! Beware of him, I say, and—don't trust Julius Winklejohn any too far!"

With a swift turn of her head Georgia looked into his honest face, then she left his side, running lightly up to the front door, pausing at the threshold barely long enough for another glance: what did it mean?

Surely she had not been offended by his thinly-veiled warning against Julius Winklejohn!

"Wonder if she isn't even better posted as to the old codger than I am myself?" mused the Gold-lace Sport as he turned away, once more heading in the direction of the Maynard residence.

That fact cut his marvelings short, and hardly had he lost sight of the door through which Georgia Winklejohn passed than he forgot both herself and her fortunes.

With a strange sparkle in his big blue eyes, Parker Sampson reached the little building whose roof sheltered Rhoda Maynard, and his big hand was positively trembling as he lifted it to tap upon the door!

Was Rhoda never to be taken by surprise? Did she always remain on guard like this?

For again his rap was forestalled, and once more the giant was caught blushing like a schoolboy!

"Sh h!" softly whispered the girl, stepping back with a silent invitation to enter. "Mother is very poorly, again, and—I fancy she must have seen you and—and the lady, a bit ago; for she cried out as though in pain, and fell away from the window before I could reach her side."

Sparkler Sam gave a little start at this, for it only served to add to the mystery. Why should sound of name or sight of face belonging to the Winklejohns so agitate the widow?

Rhoda seemed gifted with the power to read faces, for she slowly shook her curl-crowned head, then said, sadly:

"I'm sure I can't even guess why mother should take it so strangely, sir. She cried

out, and fainted dead away! And—surely it was not at sight of your face, Mr. Sampson!"

Sparkler Sam felt even more positive, but that was not a time for speculating. He saw that Rhoda was uneasy and anxious to return to her suffering parent, so he cut his call short, briefly stating that business of importance called him away from town for a couple of days, but that he hoped to return at the expiration of that period, when he would take the liberty of dropping in to ask after Mrs. Maynard's health.

Within the same hour, the Gold-lace Sport had settled all financial scores, and mounted upon a good horse, was riding briskly out of town, his gay smile answering the cordial cries which were sent after him.

CHAPTER XV.

SPARKLER SAM AND HIS PARD.

A NIGHT-CAMP of that gallant organization known to fame and history as the Texas Rangers!

Half a dozen briskly-blazing fires light up the scene, showing the densely foliaged live-oak trees, flickering over the pendent fringe of "old man's beard" as the gentle breeze sways the hoary moss.

Gathered around the fires are the Rangers, some cooking and eating, others smoking in silence or gayly laughing and jesting with naught of care for the morrow!

Further away the horses are out on picket, nibbling at the rich and nutritious if short grass, for they have been on the rope all day, and are far from starving.

All around lie in seeming confusion equipage for man and horse, but through all this apparent disorder, reigns both order and system, as would quickly be made manifest should word of enemy be given.

Then, even more ready to fight than they now were to eat or laugh or jest, as one man the Rangers would leap to war with reckless glee, and in the twinkling of an eye would be order and discipline.

Among the less satisfied nags was the animal which carried Sparkler Sam from town, and withdrawn a bit from the center of that good natured bustle was the Gold-lace Sport himself.

With him was Austin Leonard, also a member of the Rangers: a tall, athletic, fine-looking fellow of possibly five-and-twenty years, whose darkly handsome face just now was marked by an odd combination of frown and smiles; for Sparkler Sam was, for the dozenth time at least, speaking of the Winklejohn family.

So far the Gold-lace Sport had been feeling his way with unusual caution, for he had begun to fancy himself something to blame in his recent experiments, and was by no means certain that his pard would thank him for taking up the matter at all.

He felt, now, that Austin Leonard still held a deeper interest in Georgia Winklejohn than he cared to betray, and that belief gave him fresh courage to speak more openly.

So far he had merely spoken of the Winklejohns in off-hand style, taking it for granted that they must be the same family alluded to in days gone by, when Leonard felt unusually downhearted and in need of sympathy from one of his own sex.

But now he frankly admitted having spoken to the young lady of his pard, and even delivered her latest words: shaping it more as a message from Georgia than the actual facts fully justified, perhaps.

Austin Leonard was proud as he was strong, but now he was unable to mask his emotions, and that led Sparkler Sam still further. In low, half-coaxing tones he said:

"If you could only have seen her as I did, pardner! She looked as sweet as a peach and pretty as a pink when she said all that! And—I say, Aus., old man!"

"Well, what is it?"

"Don't you reckon it's a bad case of biting off your own nose just to spite your face, pardner? If a dainty lady like Miss W. should send me such a message as that—"

"What did she mean?" almost harshly cut in Leonard, his black eyes burning with a reddish luster as they fixed keenly upon the Sport. "How could she know that you and I were acquainted? You are keeping something back, Sparkler Sam! Out with it, I say!"

The Gold-lace Sport made the best of the

situation, briefly but accurately running over all that had happened in town, so far as any of the Winklejohn family was concerned.

"I reckon I was an unadulterated ass, old man," he added, in conclusion; as Leonard sat doubled over, elbows on knees and chin clasped by his joined palms, glowering silently out through the night.

"Of course 'twas no business of mine, but one thing led to another, and first I knew I was wading in over my ears! And then—well, pardner, if I did play the fool, I found out one thing: there's been more dirty work going on in this business than ever you suspected!"

"You mean—what?" asked Leonard, speaking with an evident effort.

"I mean that if ever mortal being spoke truth, Georgia Winklejohn did when she declared that she had been more sinned against than sinning!" quickly answered the Gold-lace Sport. "If you had heard her as I did! If you could have seen her right then, Austin! Why, man, dear! even as your true pard I could hardly help catching her up in my arms with a big hug and kiss and—all the rest of it!"

Sparkler Sam laughed at his own enthusiasm, but Leonard sat in gloomy silence, staring at vacancy.

For several minutes thus, then the mercurial Sport again broke the spell, speaking in coaxing accents, pretty much as he might have used toward a sulking child.

"Come, come, lad! Get a brace on, can't you? If nothing else, just lend me a belt across the cabeza for doing the rush act where an angel would have kept off the grass! Or—have I sinned too utterly for forgiveness, even?"

That last sentence broke the spell, and Leonard roused up, grasping hand of friend with cordial pressure before speaking, hurriedly:

"You meant well, of course, Sam, but I really wish you hadn't! Why—they must think I sent you to beg for me!"

"Don't you begin to think it, pardner!" quickly assured the Gold-lace Sport. "I acted like a fool, of course; but I wasn't crazy enough to let any such impression gain ground. Shall I run it all over, again?"

"No, don't bother," with a half-smile. "Only—the past is dead, and I wish you hadn't stirred up the ashes; that's all."

"But—is it all?" persisted Sparkler Sam, urged on by sincere friendship rather than idle curiosity. "Give me your paw, boy! Now look me right in the eye—so!"

"Well?"

"Tell me honestly, have you ceased to love Georgia Winklejohn, Aus.?"

The Ranger jerked away his hand to cover his face, huskily muttering, barely above his breath:

"God help me—no! I love her now, even more madly than I loved her then! And—I'll love her until I die!"

Sparkler Sam gave a silent gesture of satisfaction, the distant camp-fires lending light sufficient to show a broad smile upon his honest face just then.

Feeling fairly well assured that Georgia Winklejohn still loved her lover, also, he felt confident that all must come out right in the end, provided he played his own part as he ought.

And then, little by little his honest sympathy prevailed over the natural reserve of his friend, and as the night grew colder Austin Leonard for the first time in his life fully emptied his overlaid heart: he told of his love, his engagement, his joy and his despair, all without reservation.

Taking his view of his case, Georgia Winklejohn had jilted him most heartlessly, refusing him even a chance to explain or to clear away the vague charges brought against his honor.

"All that old rascal's work, I'll bet my head!" declared Sparkler Sam, time and time again; but the next day, when the Gold-lace Sport was taking saddle for another secret expedition which included the town where he had already met with such lively greeting, Leonard took chance to speak a few words in private.

"Don't you mention what we talked over, last night, pardner! I mean it, now!" he whispered, in low, but grim accents.

"Steady, pardner! I played the fool the other day, as I frankly owned up; but now—I'm going to make what amends lies in my power," to the full as earnestly declared the Gold-lace Sport.

"What do you mean, Sampson?"

"Just this: I know the girl loves you, just as hard as you admit loving her! I mean to tell her all this, too, unless—"

"Never!"

"It's a dead sure thing, pardner!" declared he Sport, evading that grasp with a low chuckle. "I'll do just that, unless you send her a fair message. Now take your choice, old fellow!"

Leonard turned away without reply, but Sparkler Sam shrewdly suspected the truth, and so rode leisurely away from camp, heading once more for town, where he was already anticipating seeing "Little Kid" again.

He had ridden less than half a mile when Leonard suddenly appeared, to hand him a folded paper, hurriedly speaking:

"Since you insist, Sam, give this note to Miss Winklejohn. It is the last word I ever had from her, and—that's all, pardner!"

He turned abruptly away without waiting for speech or questioning, and stowing the bit of paper away in his bosom, the Gold-lace Sport continued his journey at a brisker pace.

Strong though his friendship for Austin Leonard really was, Sparkler Sam did not long continue worrying his wits over the luckless lover's woes, believing as he did that time would surely turn all things right with the Ranger and his once-promised bride.

He had plenty of food for thought, otherwise, mainly about Rhoda and her mother; and for hours he tried to solve the mystery which evidently hung over the widow, if not of the Winklejohns as well.

Although he had many a long mile to cover before reaching his destination, Sparkler Sam was admirably mounted, and rode far more lightly than many a man of only two-thirds his actual weight.

Still, it was after dusk when he entered town, and as he drew near the Shamrock Hotel, he became aware of something unusual in the wind.

A goodly crowd was gathered there, and under the yellow lamplight Julius Winklejohn was seen, pointing to a bleeding horse as he cried out:

"Help, I ask you, men! Save my children! Five hundred dollars cash to those who bring back my niece, my son!"

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

EDGAR WINKLEJOHN seemed resolved to make amends for lost time, and to give grass precious little time to sprout beneath his feet, so far as pressing his suit for his fair cousin's hand was concerned.

From the very hour in which he won permission from Julius Winklejohn to test his luck, the young man bent his every energy toward that particular end, yet moving so skillfully as to give the young lady no excuse for taking the alarm.

For reasons which she held fairly justifiable, Georgia made no report of the audacious attempt on Diego Sandoval's part which had so opportunely been checkmated by Parker Sampson, hence both father and son found it an easier matter to carry off their new role than might have been the case, otherwise.

Lively though that experience had been while it lasted, the raid of Cortina's Lambs did not long disturb the town or its inhabitants, and by the time a day and night had passed by, everything had resumed its usual placidity.

And so, on the morning of the day which witnessed Sparkler Sam's return to town from his brief visit to the camp of the Texas Rangers, when Edgar spoke of the beautiful weather, and cordially invited his fair cousin to join him in a little ride on horse-back, Georgia not only made no objection, but actually seemed overjoyed at the idea.

There was no difficulty in procuring the necessary mounts, for the young lady was a good equestrian, and it goes without saying

that few Texans of either sex but are familiar with the saddle.

A more than comely couple they made as they took a preliminary canter through the streets before making for the open country beyond, and as it was noted how solicitous Edgar seemed—how watchful over his charming companion, eye on every movement of her spirited steed, hand in readiness to aid rider or restrain horse, divers and sundry were the knowing winks which passed from one spectator to his mate, and thus around the little congregation of witnesses.

"Purty team fer trottin' in double harness, don't ye reckon, pard?"

"You bet yer ole socks, matey!"

And so, having convinced himself that Georgia was not only well mounted, but admirably able to take care of herself so far as the horse was concerned, Edgar Winklejohn gave the word and the young couple trotted out of town, then breaking into a long-reaching, cradle-like gallop which sent the warm blood tingling to their cheeks.

This was the first time Georgia had taken a ride since leaving her far-away home for a trip to these comparative wilds, and loving the exercise as she surely did, little wonder that the girl should forget all fears of Sandoval or the raiders, should ignore all secret worry and anxieties for the time being.

And, on his side, Edgar Winklejohn was never better company, talking, laughing, jesting with graceful abandon; yet through all ran a vein of grave consideration which the young lady felt though she could not exactly explain it.

There was one thing in his favor: he was deeply in earnest, now, and playing every card as though his very life depended upon taking the trick.

When he proposed this ride, Edgar Winklejohn had fully determined to reach a final understanding with his fair cousin, and he still meant to know what he had to expect before that little expedition came to an ending by their return to town.

With this object kept in view, then, he prolonged their ride, exerting his powers of pleasing to the utmost, and succeeding so well that Georgia failed to notice just how great a distance they were leaving town and home behind.

As yet Edgar had moved under cover, but he was adroitly paving the way for an actual proposal of marriage, and it seemed as though the time was nearly ripe, when a truly startling occurrence took place.

Without the slightest warning, a couple of rough-clad, fully armed fellows sprung forth from cover, one leaping for the head of Georgia's horse, while his mate harshly ordered the young man to hold up.

"Hands up, cuss ye!" he fairly howled, thrusting an ugly-looking revolver in advance as he made the break. "Hold up, or tumble down fer—"

Winklejohn gave a cry of mingled surprise and anger, jerking his horse back to one side as he reached for a revolver at his hip; but quickly as he acted, those road-agents were even more prompt.

Pistols cracked viciously, and blood began to flow!

The horse ridden by Georgia Winklejohn broke away from that imperfect grasp, but the ruffian caught her by the skirts and fairly jerked her from the saddle, both coming to earth together.

The second knave was in better luck, for his first shot sent Edgar reeling in his saddle, to fall out of it as his horse wheeled in affright as far as that strong grip would permit. And then, almost like an echo of his first shot, the footpad fired at the other horse, his lead deeply scoring its shoulder and sending him off at breakneck speed.

With one arm thrust through the reins of the horse Winklejohn had ridden, the burly knave covered the fallen gentleman with his revolver, harshly crying out:

"Stay put, dug-gun ye! Try to kick, even, an' I'll ram-jam ye chuck full o' blue pills."

Then he glanced over to where his mate was struggling with the frightened young lady, a touch of scorn in his voice as he called out:

"Shall I call out the malishy fer to help ye, pardy? Ef ye can't handle one weenty

gal, reckon you'd better pull in yer sign an' shet up shop—that's what!"

But he saw that the "weenty gal" was proving no easy customer to handle, taken at a disadvantage as the fellow had been by the awkward bolt of the horse; and casting the long reins over a convenient rock, he sprung to the aid of his mate.

Between them they quickly conquered the young lady, and as the easiest method of cutting short her mingled threats and pleadings, a none too clean bandanna was tied closely over her mouth.

All this took a certain quantity of time, but through it all Edgar Winklejohn lay motionless, save for an occasional faint shiver, seemingly stunned or fatally injured.

The fellow who had elected to capture the maiden, showed signs of angry uneasiness at this, but his opening oaths were cut short by his comrade who bent over the prostrate figure.

"Augh, button lip, durn ye! Take me fer a pesky lunkhead? Reckon I'd make dead pork when live hog's wuth so mighty much more?"

"Then he hain't— Ye didn't make no mistake, pard?"

"Jest creased; an' most elegantly done, too, ef I do say it myself!" came the ready response. "Stiddy, blame ye! Don't make me clap the kickin'-strap onto ye, critter, or you'll wish— Stiddy be jerks!"

Evidently Winklejohn was rallying from that shot and fall, but his struggles were futile as they were feeble at first.

With a rapidity which spoke well for his training, the burly ruffian stripped Edgar of all weapons, then dragged him to his feet, holding him so that he could look straight across to where Georgia was equally helpless in a ruffianly grasp.

"Look at that purty sight, critter, an' then wish ye was bornded with heap sight mo' sense!" briskly spoke his captor, one hand on wrist, the other lightly clasping his neck from behind.

"Georgia! Oh, my love!" huskily panted the young man, making another attempt to break away, but only causing those muscular fingers to sharply contract.

"Stiddy, don't I tell ye, critter?"

"Don't— Kill me, but don't— Spare her!" chokingly panted the young man, as he began to turn dark in the face from that pitiless grip.

Georgia strove to break away, forgetting her own peril at sight of that which surely menaced her cousin; but the ruffians had the upper hand, and mercilessly exercised their power.

After a brief and vain struggle, Winklejohn was choked down, and as he was granted time for rallying, his captor coarsely laid down the law.

"That's jest a weenty sample, critter! Make 'nother sech fool break an' I'll paint zebra all over the pelt o' ye! An' wuss then that, even: you'll be fetchin' nasty doin's to the gal; don't ye see?"

"Talk a bit to her, too, matey!" suggested the less glib-tongued knave. "Durned ef she hain't 'nough fer to wear a saint into fiddle-strings—yes she be, now!"

"I'm a-talkin' to all two-both-on-'em, an ef they hain't plum' fools they won't hurry up to fergit it, nuther! This is hc-ole business, I'm tellin' ye, critters: business from the word git-up! An' while we're jest after the gold, you kin durn easy make the red come, too!"

Steadying Winklejohn as before, he continued:

"Fer last warnin', critter! You act white, or she pays scott! Jest so long as ye both behave yourselves, jest so long we'll treat ye clean. Otherwise—contrairy!"

"Spare her, gentlemen," faltered Edgar, in husky tones and strange meekness for one of his hot temper and imperious disposition. "Do what you like with me, but don't— Harm one hair of her head, you devils! and I'll never know rest until you have paid a thousand deaths as penalty!"

Piercedly came that sudden outburst, but instead of angering it seemed to please the brace of ruffians, for they chuckled as they shot swift glances across the brief space separating them.

"Didn't I tell ye so, pardner?"

"Bet yer sweet life, matey!"

"An' that makes it all right, critter," again speaking to Winklejohn. "We've gone into this job to make money out of it, an' so ye kin rest easy we hain't gwine fer to injure valeble propety 'less ye jest will hev it that way. An' so—"

"What! You mean to exact ransom?" exclaimed Edgar, quickly.

"Hit it, fu'st clatter!" with a nod of approval; but then adding in gruffer tones: "Now jest put a button on, critter, or fare the wuss! Git the hosses ready, pardner! We want to rack out o' this afore any fool critters come to see how the hoss got his sickness—more fool you fer lettin' him give ye the slip!"

A surly growl came back from the lesser ruffian; but his words were indistinguishable as he hurried in to deeper cover, to fetch forth a pair of good-looking horses, ready equipped for the road.

While this was being done, one man had to guard both captives, which he seemed fully capable of doing under the circumstances.

So far Georgia had not spoken, mainly because of that disgusting gag; but so far as her face could be seen, it expressed far more courage and less terror than one could naturally expect under the circumstances.

Thus brought closer together, Edgar improved his chance by quickly whispering to his cousin:

"Have courage, darling! Never mind what's my fate, you shall not suffer harm or wrong! I'll lay down my life—"

"Augh, take a tumble all over yerself!" coarsely broke in their captor as his keen ears caught those words. "Blame yer life; it's the money we're after!"

"If you think I'm a wealthy man, sir—"

"I know what I know, an' this much I do know," again interrupted the burly rascal. "I know the young leddy is jest lousy with ducats, an' ef you can't pay fer yourself, she's got to whack up fer the couple o' ye, or—waal, ef we can't git gold, we'll git our pay, bet yer life!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HELD FOR RANSOM.

GEORGIA turned paler at that thinly veiled threat, and even Edgar Winklejohn seemed taken aback for the moment.

"That's heap-plenty fer so much, I reckon," less gruffly spoke their chief captor. "I jest wanted to let ye hev somethin' to chaw on while we're gittin' to safer quarters, ye understand?"

"All ready, matey!"

"Then make it ready, pardner!"

The horse recently ridden by Winklejohn was brought forward by the smaller villain, who held its head while the young man climbed into the saddle, seemingly beginning to feel the effects of his awkward tumble before that vicious shot.

"Course you kin make a break ef ye like to chauce the penalty, critter," observed the more muscular ruffian. "But don't fergit jest this: ef you should run off, the gal cain't! An' that's heap-plenty!"

Evidently deeming this ample warning, the fellow grasped Georgia in his sturdy arms, heaving her clear of the ground and swinging her high enough to land safely upon the horse, just back of the saddle now filled by her cousin.

He retained his grasp upon her person, however, while adding:

"Straddle yer critter, pard! No need o' flingin' temptation right chuck-up in tha'r faces, I reckon! Mount, an' take charge, will ye?"

"You bet yer sweet life, matey!"

Where such extreme precautions were taken all the way through, few men could have seen encouragement for a bold break; and, after the significant warning let fall by the larger knave, Winklejohn would hardly have felt justified in improving such a chance if it had been offered.

Mounting, one riding on each side of the doubly laden horse, the two speculators in human liberty rode off at a brisk pace, casting more than one uneasy glance to the rear, evidently fearful lest the runaway horse be the means of guiding armed avengers to the rescue.

More than once during the next hour the

larger rascal berated his more clumsy mate for letting slip his fourfooted prize; but harsh though his terms were, no quarrel resulted.

Watching his chance, Edgar softly whispered encouragement.

"Don't give way, dearest, but wait and watch! I'll save you from the clutches of these evil wretches, or lose my own life in the effort!"

Georgia made no reply, although the dirty handkerchief had long since been removed from over her lips.

Those cunning little eyes just then turned her way, and she feared lest his keen ears might catch even a guarded whisper.

But she sent a little thrill along the arm that half-encircled Edgar's waist, and just the ghost of a smile lighted up his dark face for an instant.

After all, matters might have turned out worse for his hopes!

The kidnappers cut little time to waste, riding along at a rapid rate, seemingly heading for a point they had previously decided upon, and with each hour plunging deeper into the unsettled wilds.

Winklejohn ventured to expostulate, more than once, declaring that though they might ride clear to the Canada line, so doing would not add an ounce-weight to the force of their extortions; but just as often he was rudely checked and warned to make less chin-music.

"It's fer we-uns to do the talkin', not fer you, critter! Better be countin' up how many rocks ye value that life o' yours at, fer when the time comes fer solid business, it's mighty short work we mean to make of it all, ye want to know!"

At first Winklejohn declared that, so far from being a rich man, he could not see where he was to raise ransom for himself, even though they set their price low down in the hundreds; but then, as he had more time in which to weigh the awkward situation, he altered his tactics.

After another crisp speech anent the ransom expected, he said:

"All right, gentlemen! You can set your figures, once for all, and I guarantee your receiving the full amount asked for this lady. Set her free; give her full liberty, and show the most direct route to town, then she will—"

"Augh, come off!" coarsely interrupted the larger knave, with a short chuckle of angry scorn. "Take us fer blame' fools, don't ye?"

"Of course not, sir; only I thought—"

"You thought to play us fer suckers, eh? Waal, that cock won't even begin to fight. Eh, pardner?"

"You bet yer sweet life, matey!"

"Set her free, eh? Turn her loose on your promise to pay, is it? Bah! you must take us fer nat'ral born durn fools, stranger!"

"That's what!"

"I pledge you my life, gentlemen—"

"Augh, shet-tran or we'll gag ye tight! Reckon ye kin foolish us? Ef we set the gal free to go back to town, she'd tell her little story, straight enough—"

"Isn't that just what I'm trying to say, sir?"

"Shet up! Oh, yes, she'd sing her little song like an angel! An' our pay would come right smart off in a holy hurry, too! Only—it'd come in lead an' cold steel, not in gold or silver!"

"You bet yer sweet life, matey!"

"Not so!" hastily declared Winklejohn, still fighting desperately against odds. "I pledge you my honor—more! I'd stay with you as her hostage, don't you see?"

"Yas, we see, an' what we do see is jest like this: you'll stay, an' so will she stay—leastwise ontel we've met up with our pals an' hed a good long talk-it-all-over!" gruffly decided the ruffian, quickening their pace like one who has nothing further to say.

For some little time Winklejohn kept silence, his head drooping on chest, his face dark and gloomy as though in keeping with his thoughts.

Yet it is difficult to kill hope, and presently he ventured to address their chief captor, asking:

"Unless you let one of us bear the message, sir, how can you expect to come to terms about the ransom money?"

"That's worryin' you mighty sight wuss then it's doin' us, don't ye reckon, critter?"

"Isn't it natural for me to seek a solution, sir? If you would let one of us go, as bearer of your ultimatum—"

"Which we won't, an' that's flat! We'll never slacken our grip on ary one o' ye afore we kin fairly finger the ding-bats; see?"

"But how can you arrange terms, unless you send word in?"

"Oh, that's part o' the trade, an' you hain't gwine fer to steal our business, critter," chuckled the burly knave. "An' es fer the time: waal, thar's no sech turrible rush, I reckon. It'll be all the mo' easy to settle them when your old man hes hed time fer to sweat a bit!"

Edgar Winklejohn abandoned the effort in despair, and said no more.

That hurried flight lasted until far along in the afternoon, when a halt was called at a lonely part of the hills, where the kidnappers seemed to anticipate meeting with others of that ilk.

None such were present, however, nor could any signs be found to show that they had been at and left the rendezvous. Settling this point by a hasty examination of their surroundings, the two ruffians put their captives in bonds, and then looked after their own comfort.

Edgar Winklejohn made no open resistance when the thongs were produced. With two fully-armed men against him, he recognized the worse than folly of fighting such odds, and quietly submitted to be bound.

Georgia was treated after a like fashion, and then, placed far enough apart to guard against one helping the other, yet not too far for fairly easy conversation, they were left to await the ending.

It was not until twilight was fairly settling over the earth that Edgar had aught to say which could convey even a hint of comfort to his fair cousin; but then, after a wary look around to make sure their captors were not within earshot, he whispered, eagerly:

"Courage, Georgial! For your life don't cry out or make a sign to betray us! I think—I am almost certain I can get rid of my bonds in a few minutes more!"

In spite of his warning words, a faint cry escaped the maiden's lips at this thrilling announcement, and an instant later one of the ruffians approached, gruffly demanding:

"What yer yawpin' over, anyway? What yer want?"

"A sup of water; nothing more, sir," Edgar hastened to say. "If you will be so kind—the lady is parched!"

After another surly growl, the fellow procured the draught, and then warning both against any more nonsense, he slouched off to rejoin his mate.

Gently reproaching the girl for disregarding his warning, Edgar spoke of his hopes more openly, declaring that, unless his bonds were changed for the worse ere long, he felt positive he could slip or break them, when the rest would be easy enough!

But Georgia viewed the matter in a far different light, and in trembling tones beseeched her cousin not to incur such terrible risk.

"What is money in comparison with your life, dear cousin?" she urged, huskily. "I say, nothing! You must not—you shall not, Edgar!"

"I surely shall, if I can only slip my hands free, though!"

"You will not! I'll pay the sum they demand—I'd rather pay it fourfold than have you run the risk of your life, cousin!"

"Then—you would grieve for me if—if I should fail, dear Georgia?" eagerly whispered the young man, his black eyes brightly glittering through the deepening twilight.

The maiden involuntarily shrunk back, shivering as though struck by an icy draught just then. But she quickly rallied and repeated her former assurance: anything would be better than throwing away his life in such a reckless manner.

Dim though the surrounding light was, Winklejohn saw sufficient to warn him against pressing that particular point further, just then.

He yielded so far as to say that he would wait until he saw a fair chance for success, before making any decided movement, but that was all Georgia could win from his lips.

Meanwhile the two ruffians seemed bent on taking life easily while waiting for the arrival of their comrades.

They kindled a fire where its glow would be hidden to all eyes at a distance, and producing material for a plentiful if coarse meal, set about preparing supper.

A fair proportion of this was brought the captives, and offered bit by bit, as being less trouble than removing bonds only to replace them.

Georgia would have declined, only for her cousin, who begged her to eat, if only for his sake.

She read his veiled meaning, and yielded, though she could only swallow a few mouthfuls of the rare meat and coarse biscuit.

Winklejohn ate heartily, seemingly glad to escape the necessity of feeding himself, in which case his efforts toward freedom might have been discovered, and that would mean a hopeless captivity afterward.

While "feedin' the menadgery" as he termed it, the ruffian talked briskly enough, evidently in high glee over their promising speculation; but no sooner had he gone back to the camp-fire, where his mate was both eating and drinking, than Winklejohn fell to work at his bonds, using so much strength and address that, only a few minutes later, he whispered:

"Not a word, for my life, Georgia! I'm free! And now—I'll kill those devils, or they'll have to kill me!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

FLAXING FOR A FORTUNE.

THE startled maiden had no time given her for remonstrating, for as he spoke, Edgar Winklejohn rose to his feet, his bonds falling away, either broken or slipped off his wrists!

"Not a word—not a sound, even!" the young man whispered, swiftly, as one hand made a warning gesture in her direction, his eyes fixed upon their captors across the way. "I've got to jump them without warning, or they'll—for your life, darling!"

He never so much as glanced her way, then, his whole attention being fixed upon the enemy near the little campfire.

The bigger ruffian was seated with back against a tree-trunk, lazily smoking a stumpy-stemmed pipe while watching his mate who was busied over the fire, cooking a fresh supply of grub, doubtless to have in readiness for their comrades when the rendezvous should be kept.

Close at hand stood the horse which the young couple had ridden since their capture, loosely hitched to a scrubby tree, still saddled and bridled as though intended for further use before long.

The other animals were further away, stripped and grazing at ease.

All this Edgar Winklejohn took in at a single glance; and even more: for he saw the belt of arms which had been taken from about his middle, now hanging from a knot just above the seated knave's head.

Evidently the young man had planned his campaign in advance, for he hesitated barely long enough to let fall that hasty warning, then crouched low down, stealing swiftly yet noiselessly toward the enemy.

He only paused once, and that was to secure a heavy, knotted club which might serve the lack of a better weapon; and then, without the slightest sound or warning, he leaped forward, striking as he came!

Through all, Georgia had been watching like one under a horrible spell, fearing discovery with each moment that passed; and now, as she saw her cousin striking so savagely at the smoking tough, she gave a faint scream, closing her eyes with a shiver of horror.

But not quickly enough to escape seeing the result of that blow.

A crashing sound, then the burly ruffian toppled over sideways, much as a rotten log might fall, making no sound, no cry, no attempt to guard himself or to deal a blow in return!

So desperate was that stroke that the club splintered and flew apart in Winklejohn's grasp, leaving him totally unarmed for the moment, yet making sound enough to startle the lesser knave from his cooking.

He gave a short howl of angry amazement, dropping all else to jerk a pistol from his belt; but Edgar Winklejohn was acting even more swiftly, and snatched a gun from the suspended belt, both weapons exploding as one.

With a fierce curse the tough staggered back, fairly into the fire, tripping over the burning logs and falling headlong; but if he was wounded his hurts surely were not mortal.

Even as he fell, his pistol spoke again, and though his aim was wild it caused Winklejohn to duck and dodge, briefly hindering a second shot on his side.

Crack-crack!

Another double report, and giving a vicious curse, the ruffian rolled swiftly over, then scrambled into the nearest cover, seemingly wounded yet still far from being disabled.

Winklejohn made no attempt to follow, or to crowd his advantage, just then, wheeling toward his horse instead, jerking the bridle-reins free and then running back to where Georgia was still lying helpless.

"Quick! for your dear life!" the excited young man cried, catching her bodily in his arms and heaving her upward to the saddle. "Cling fast if you love life! We've got to—Those other devils may jump us any moment, now!"

Just how she managed it the maiden could hardly explain, but she did "cling fast," hampered though she was; and jumping up behind her, Edgar urged the frightened animal forward with voice and heels.

Nor was their haste lessened in the least by another shot from the bushes, out of which staggered the second ruffian, howling and cursing, seemingly too badly injured to think of instant pursuit, yet still able to thirst for their lives.

His lead went far astray, however, and there was no time granted him for further shooting.

The doubly-laded horse plunged through the scrubby bushes, fiercely urged on by the young man, who found his hands full keeping Georgia safe from falling.

Without thought of course or direction that mad flight lasted for fully quarter of an hour; but then, reaching around his fair charge, Edgar succeeded in grasping the reins and checked the horse.

"Hark! Don't speak until—Listen, for your life!" he hurriedly spoke, then bending head as he turned to look behind them.

There were no signs of chase, no sounds to indicate pursuit.

Satisfied on this score at last, Edgar gave a long, free breath, then broke into a hearty laugh which served to show how severe a strain he had experienced during those last few minutes.

"Did you see how—Did you see the rascal tumble over, Georgia?"

"Don't—oh, don't!" shudderingly gasped the girl, overcome by all she had seen and felt of late. "I never—Oh, Edgar, why didn't you do as I wished? I'd rather—far rather have sacrificed half my fortune than have you stain—Oh, 'twas horrible!"

This was hardly the manner in which the victor expected to be greeted, judging from his swift fall of temperature; but he never more fully realized the importance of the stake for which he was playing than right now, and smothering something which certainly was not a prayer, he busied himself with freeing Georgia from bonds.

By the time this was done, the young woman had rallied in a measure, and controlled her voice sufficiently to express her gratitude for her rescue.

Scarcely had he accomplished this, however than their ears caught sounds of distant shouting, and Winklejohn quickly interpreted them.

"The mates those villains expected have surely come, Georgia, and they'll do all they can to follow and hunt us down!"

"But we can escape them, cousin? Surely we can—Can't we hurry back to town, Edgar?"

"We've got to get a move on, that's dead

certain!" Winklejohn decided, without actually answering her question. "If it wasn't so dark! I reckon we'll manage better if we shift seats, Georgia."

This did not take much time, and then their flight was resumed, an abrupt angle being made, the more surely to bother those who might try to follow their trail through the night.

For more than an hour the doubly-burdened horse was urged onward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, but then Winklejohn drew rein once more, muttering something which sent a thrill of dismay through his fair companion.

"But—surely not lost!" echoed the maiden, faintly.

"Well, of course not—It's a new country to me, and we set off in such a hurry that—lost? Oh, no! Not lost exactly, but—"

"Tell me the very worst, Edgar," more firmly spoke the girl. "I am strong enough to bear it, cousin; really I am!"

"Well, there is no 'worst' about it, dear, unless lying out for the rest of the night may be called that," more lightly declared Winklejohn. "As soon as daylight comes I can cipher our course, but until then I really think we'd better stay right where we are!"

"Unless—do you think these men can find us?"

Georgia shivered as she spoke, glancing around as though she felt the gloom must be peopled with evil wretches.

Edgar gave her hearty assurance on that score, however, and assisting her to alight, himself left the saddle.

Working quickly and systematically he was not long in completing their scant preparations for passing the night; and then, always keeping in view the fortune for which he was playing such a bold hand, he snuggled close to the maiden, telling her over and over again how his heart had been lacerated by witnessing her sore trials while he was unable to even alleviate them.

Again Georgia expressed her gratitude, and then pleaded want of sleep after so wearisome a trip; but Winklejohn was not willing to let it go at that.

He felt that it was now or never with him, and had fully resolved to put his fate to the touch that very night!

But even his eager desire for success could not blind him long to the discouraging fact that Georgia was trying all she knew how to evade the proposal her womanly intuition warned her was impending.

Still, he pressed his point, and finally put his hopes into plain speech; vowing that he had loved her long as ardently, and that without her sweet companionship as wife, life would not be worth the living.

Since she could not avert nor evade, Georgia met the crisis bravely, and in grave, earnest tones begged Edgar to forever abandon all such vain hopes.

"I have no love to give you, cousin," she said, sadly. "My heart is dead, and filled with ashes. I loved once—and so loving, loved for all time!"

"But you surely can't think Leonard will—"

A small hand closed over his lips and cut his angry speech short.

"Say no more, cousin, unless you wish to drive me away, forever! My heart is dead, I tell you! I shall never again love mortal man, as a true woman should love before marrying. Don't press me further, unless you wish me to hate you, instead!"

Even a devout lover could hardly fail to understand this, and Winklejohn was cool-headed enough to see that he would only lessen his chance of future winning by crowding his game now.

Bending low his head, he gently kissed Georgia's hand, then drew to a little distance without a word of reproach or of moaning. But he did breathe a low, dejected sigh, smiling satirically in the darkness at his own admirable acting an instant later!

The rest of the night passed away without event worthy noting, and bright and early Winklejohn was astir, caring for the good steed before turning toward his fair cousin.

To her he expressed his grief that food was lacking, but added his hopes of quickly finding their way out of the wilderness,

when a brisk gallop would surely carry them home.

Georgia could not help seeing how forced was his light speech, and she seemed conscious of ill-doing when he sad eyes took note of Edgar's dejected countenance as he turned away to prepare the horse for renewing their journey.

Mounting as before, they pressed onward at a fairly rapid gait, each minute hoping to come to the turning point where ignorance would become certainty; but just as often were they disappointed, and long before the sun reached its zenith Winklejohn was forced to admit the unpleasant truth: they were really and truly lost in the wilderness!

His anxious looks, even more than his words, told Georgia how grave the situation might become; but she made no moan, by her very quietude proving how completely she trusted herself to the guidance of her cousin.

There was little of acting now in face or tones of the young man, and he urged the heavily burdened horse on without mercy, now taking one course, then changing for another as he fancied he caught sight of a remembered landmark.

Thus hour after hour was spent, until the sun was getting far down the western slope, and the overtaken horse showed signs of failing.

Not until then would Winklejohn relieve the animal of his weight, although Georgia herself had called his attention to the unwelcome fact, and even suggested that she would walk for a spell.

Long ere this, too, both man and woman were feeling the pangs of hunger, all the more sharply, perhaps, because neither saw any prospect for appeasing that craving.

As the afternoon waned, Winklejohn began looking around in hopes of sighting some game which he might secure by a lucky shot from his revolver; but with a discouraging want of success.

This was a lamentable collapse to his sanguine hopes, surely!

But then, just when both were on the point of despairing, Georgia gave a quick, low exclamation, staring ahead and pointing that way with a hand that perceptibly trembled.

"Look!" she said, in barely audible tones. "Men—horsemen! Are they friends, or—oh, if they should be those wretches, Edgar!"

A half-smothered oath escaped Winklejohn's lips at that discovery, and gripping pistol-butt he sprung forward for a look through the bushes which cut off his view just then.

He saw an armed and mounted force, and then he saw more! So much more that he recoiled with a vicious oath, hoarsely exclaiming:

"Back, girl! They are enemies who—"

"Not not enemies, but friends!" cried Georgia, sending her horse forward, impulsively. "I see Mr. Sampson, and—oh, heavens!"

She recoiled the next moment, turning ghastly pale.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

GEORGIA WINKLEJOHN saw that she was mistaken in her belief that one of the party ahead was Sparkler Sam, but she was now clear of cover and plainly visible to the armed force.

As she recoiled with a choking cry, a somewhat similar sound broke from masculine lips, then a horseman dashed forward, eyes blazing, face working convulsively under intense emotions.

"You—it is you, Miss Winklejohn?" he exclaimed, hoarsely, as he leaped out of the saddle without drawing rein in the slightest.

Edgar jumped forward, pistol in hand, but stopped short as he only too clearly recognized the man who was then lending his cousin much-needed support.

For this was none other than Austin Leonard, once the betrothed husband of the nearly fainted woman whose waist his strong arm was encircling just now!

Only for a moment did he hesitate, then stepped forward, putting up his pistol and sternly shoving the Ranger aside as he spoke:

"I'll take care of the lady, thank you, sir! She is not— Rouse up Georgia, darling! We are saved, now, for these gentlemen are— What are you, pray, sir?"

"Texan Rangers, Mr. Winklejohn," answered Leonard, with sudden coldness, bowing and drawing aside without paying attention to the faint cry given by the maiden, or noticing her slight gesture as though she would fain draw him back to her side.

By this time the company of Rangers had come up, curious enough, yet too polite to ask questions which might prove embarrassing.

While inwardly cursing the crooked luck which added Austin Leonard to that company, Edgar Winklejohn resolved to make the best of a bad bargain, and swiftly improved this opportunity by whispering in the ear of his fair cousin:

"Brace up, Georgia! Don't give that villain cause for laughing at your weakness, girl! Show him that you are a true Winklejohn; show him you are still too proud to add to his insolent triumph!"

A hot flush came into the maiden's face, and she showed how surely that poison had entered her brain.

And then, in a measure relieved of his worst fears, Winklejohn mingled with the Rangers, frankly explaining their awkward situation, telling the truth as far as it lay on the surface.

Sharp ejaculations of indignation came from those honest fellows, and more than one of their number urged the young man to describe the brace of toughs, as well as to point out the direction in which that rendezvous lay.

Winklejohn smiled faintly at the last question, then said:

"If I only could, gentlemen! If I could do that, would I be here, all at sea as you found us? If I knew where to look for that rendezvous, I'd also know in which direction to look for town!"

In telling their story, of course Edgar had mentioned their lack of food, and the Rangers lost no time in supplying this want, their leader bidding his men pitch camp for the night.

Austin Leonard was one of the busiest in preparing food for the cousins, but he never offered to serve it; he kept as far away from both Georgia and Edgar as he could, without actually abandoning camp.

Winklejohn smiled covertly as he noted this, but the maiden grew paler and more sad-looking, her pride fading away in like proportion.

So near, and yet so far!

She had loved this man so purely, so tenderly, so entirely! She had placed such implicit trust in him, until—until the awful proof of his utter villainess lay spread before her horrified eyes!

And yet—was that proof real, or was it manufactured for the occasion by those who felt a powerful interest in keeping her from giving hand where heart had long since gone forth?

She was thinking of all this, now, just as she had thought of it on countless occasions before. And now her belief in past treachery grew stronger the oftener she stole veiled glances at that pale, stern, sad countenance.

Surely that was not the face of a contemptible villain? Surely one so noble in face could not be so utterly vile at heart!

It was not until after the food had been prepared and that early meal fairly disposed of, that Austin Leonard took decided action.

He, too, had been busy thinking over the past, but with him there was an added tinge of unmerited shame as he recalled the confession recently made by Sparkler Sam, his jovial comrade and heart-brother.

What impression had the genial giant left upon the maiden's mind? Could she for even an instant believe that he had sanctioned that audacious experiment, much less hatched the cunning scheme?

That thought sent hot waves to his cheeks, and though it was worse than pulling teeth, Leonard made up his mind to clear away all such humiliating impressions, let the effort cost him what it might.

For that first hour Edgar Winklejohn kept close and jealous watch and ward over

his fair cousin, but as neither showed signs of drawing together, he gradually relaxed his guardianship, and yielding to a covertly exhibited flask of whisky, he drew apart, thus giving Leonard the very opening for which the Ranger had been watching.

Fearing to hesitate lest his courage should fairly abandon him, the young man strode across to where Georgia was seated on a little roll of blankets at the foot of the moss-flagged live-oak, he bowed gravely, then addressed her in low, studied tones:

"I beg your pardon for intruding, Miss Winklejohn, but there are a few words I really ought to say. Have I your gracious permission?"

Georgia flushed warmly at his coming, but paled again as he spoke so coldly, so unlike his old-time self.

Still, she would not flinch from the ordeal now it presented itself, and rising to her feet she said, quietly:

"As you wish, sir. Perhaps it would be better—for us both!"

A barely perceptible hesitation, then the Ranger bowed again and offered his arm in silence.

The tips of her fingers rested lightly upon his sleeve, and she silently yielded to his guidance when he moved quickly away from the glow of the camp-fires.

Neither one spoke again until they were in a fairly secluded spot, yet not so far away they could not see and be seen by any who chose to glance that way.

Here the gloom beneath the trees was quite sufficient to mask any unseen emotion, and that was a point which neither maiden nor man was sorry for.

For a few seconds after halting silence reigned, for in spite of his acknowledged courage, Austin Leonard was trembling, now, and feared to wholly trust the steadiness of his tongue.

But then he forced himself to break the ice, his words coming freely enough after the first plunge.

"I have seen my friend, Parker Sampson, Miss Winklejohn, and he confessed to me all he told you, the other day. I am sorry—how sorry I fail to find words to express!"

"It was nothing—nothing serious, sir," faintly murmured Georgia.

"It seemed very much—to me!" huskily answered the Ranger. "I love Sampson as few men love one another, but when I heard—when he told me how he dared—surely you cannot for even an instant believe I would use such means to—to learn of your sentiments, Georgia?"

In his strong excitement the name escaped before he could check it; but he drew back with a hasty bow, muttering an apology.

"Is it so grave an error, Austin?" quietly asked the young woman, a hand gently touching his arm as she added: "Even though the past is dead—far too dead for either of us to revive it, even should such be wished—need we be utter strangers? Then—I was Georgia then, I am not offended by being called Georgia now!"

His hands went out with a passionate gesture, only to drop again, then join fingers almost fiercely behind his back. And with forced calmness he spoke in his turn:

"You are more than generous, Miss Winklejohn, but I spoke without due reflection, and I promise you I will never offend in like manner. I merely wished to explain, and this will serve: Sampson is a dear, good friend, but far too rash in some respects.

"I never gave him authority to represent me in any manner, and his conduct then was wholly without my knowledge or—or my wishes!"

Georgia shivered at these coldly-measured sentences, but she nerved herself to say what was upon her mind just then, and if her tones were unusually cold, that was owing to the severe restraint she felt compelled to place upon herself, rather than to lack of heart as Leonard felt.

"Your apology is accepted in the same spirit as tendered, Mr. Leonard, but I assure you I never for an instant believed you guilty of such an unmanly subterfuge."

"You simply do me justice, Miss Winklejohn."

"And now—may I congratulate you, sir? I do, with all my heart and soul! May your future be cloudless, and may she bless your life and home with—"

"I don't— What are you saying, Miss Winklejohn?" almost rudely interrupted the Ranger, grasping an arm in his excitement.

Georgia shrunk and trembled, but she rallied, to repeat the words let drop by Sparkler Sam in her hearing though not in her presence.

"He said you were dead—in love!"

Austin Leonard caught his breath sharply, then huskily spoke.

"And he told the truth, whether he meant it thus or not, Georgia Winklejohn! I am dead in love—dead in love with you, my angel!"

Just then a sharp cry broke upon their ears, coming from the camp:

"To arms, men! Cortina's Lambs are upon us!"

CHAPTER XX.

SPARKLER SAM GIVES GOOD ADVICE.

"STAY here, out of sight and danger, darling!" cried Leonard, pushing the maiden closer to the tree, then drawing weapons as he sprung away to bear his share of the coming shock.

But the alarm proved to be a false one, so far as the Mexican bandits were concerned; for the coming force was quickly recognized as a friendly one, and only a few seconds later the Rangers echoed back the stentorian cheer sent forth by the capacious lungs of the Gold-lace Sport.

There was both laughter and gay badinage flying about as the natural result of that ill-founded alarm, and no man seemed better pleased over his error than was Edgar Winklejohn himself, particularly when he found that this was a rescuing force from town, with Sparkler Sam and Julius Winklejohn at their head.

"I reckon I've lost a good bit of my old nerve," he frankly confessed, while warmly gripping the skinny hand of his paternal progenitor. "When I glimpsed you coming, I felt that nothing less than a visit from the Chaparral Wolf would complete our chain of misfortunes!"

"You haven't— Georgia isn't— My poor niece!" brokenly cried the lawyer-guardian, as his glittering black eyes looked in vain for the maiden. "Don't tell me she has—"

"Thank Heaven, no!" fervently cried his noble son. "Georgia is both alive and well, only I haven't seen her since— Ah! here she is, now!"

As Georgia came forward to greet her uncle, Edgar drew back; but in one respect he had diverged widely from the trail of truth.

He had seen his fair cousin, and seeing her in such close if not confidential communion with her former lover, Austin Leonard, he was on the point of interrupting that dangerous interview at all hazards, when a lucky glimpse of the approaching force gave him his cue.

Even as he shouted forth that call to arms, he recognized both the Gold-lace Sport and his own father; but his real end was gained, and the lovers once more separated.

It was a time of mutual explanations, and while that lasted there was little danger of the young couple coming together again.

Before all was cleared away, and it was decided to bivouac in company for the night, Edwin found chance to warn his father of this latest complication, as well as telling him how utterly he had failed to win an acknowledgment of love from those fair lips.

"Keep her away from that devil, or you'll have an explosion big enough to send us both through the tree-tops, Gov'nor!" he muttered, with a dark scowl as he looked across to where Sparkler Sam was gallantly paying his respects to Miss Winklejohn.

"She hasn't—you've hindered an explanation so far?"

"I've tried, but—devil burn 'em both! I thought Georgia had too much pride of her own to stoop so low, but if they aren't just as hot and eager as ever, then I'm a howling liar from 'way up the creek!"

Fortunately both father and son were a little removed from the ruddy glow of the cheery camp-fires, for neither face was a pleasant one to look upon, just then.

For a brief space even Julius Winklejohn let his crafty mask drop, and the revelation was anything but agreeable.

"Why didn't you hinder the meeting, you

ass?" he said, almost viciously, as he turned eyes toward the spot where the athletic and handsome young Ranger was visible by the fire-glow.

"How could I hinder it, when we were both starving, and it came so suddenly? Don't you snarl, Gov'nor, for it's mainly your fault, after all!"

"Was it my bull-headedness that insisted upon playing such a time-worn and silly game?" retorted the elder Winklejohn. "Did I hatch up this precious scheme to show you off as a heroic—ass?"

Edwin gave an answering growl, lacking a more cutting retort. And his worthy parent continued in the same low but vicious tones:

"Why didn't you find out what your chances were, while your fellows had you both captive? Then if the duck was dead, couldn't you— Oh, you miserable bungler!"

"What better could I do?" surlily muttered Edgar. "Didn't we all play the game for what it was worth, I'd like to know?"

"Not as I would have played it!"

"Talking's easy, but—"

"Acting would have been just as easy, if you hadn't lacked the necessary nerve or wit!" sharply retorted the older knave, his sinewy hands gripping each other as though the long fingers were closing around the throat of a helpless enemy. "If it had been me—"

"Well?" asked Edwin as the other paused without finishing his sentence. "If it had been you—what?"

"I'd have made the break, just the same, but a stray shot would have rendered all scheming unnecessary for the future."

Letting those villainous words fall in a hissing whisper, Julius Winklejohn turned away toward the nearest camp-fire, leaving Edgar to digest both words and meaning at his leisure.

As a further proof that he knew how to meet an emergency, Julius Winklejohn began urging the necessity of starting without further delay for home; but Sparkler Sam at once flung himself into the breach, declaring that both horses and men were far too wearied for another forced march, at least until after both had fled.

"That's the message coming to me from the equatorial regions!" he said, briskly, then calling forth at the top of his magnificent voice: "Attention, company! Ho, all ye honest citizens! Pick open your ears and turn peepers this way in a holy hurry!"

That was sufficient to insure full attention, and then the Gold-lace Sport added:

"It is moved and seconded that we don't get a move on: that we stay right where we now are until after supper, sleep and breakfast! All those in favor of the motion will please say I!"

Almost as one man the answer came, and Sparkler Sam bowed his full approval.

"Good enough, gentlemen! The ayes have it, but, just as a matter of form I'll put the opposite question. Only—the fool who votes in the contrary wants first to ask himself if he can lick Parker Sampson, for that comes next on the programme!"

A general laugh followed, and if Sparkler Sam really put the question, silence alone voted, and without a dissenting voice he declared the motion prevailed.

Julius Winklejohn found his first move checked, and he had a shrewd suspicion that Sparkler Sam was actuated by more than hunger or reluctance for the saddle in making this motion.

Still, being without backing, and only one against the many, there was no use in fighting against that ruling, and he contented himself with doing the next best thing.

He passed over to where his fair niece was seated, grimly resolved to never part company for even a single minute, so long as Austin Leonard remained in their vicinity.

Sparkler Sam saw this move, and interpreted it correctly enough; but the jovial scout borrowed no fresh trouble on that score.

He played his customary role through the next hour or two; eating and drinking, laughing and jesting, keeping all in his company roaring with laughter or chuckling in glee.

He still found ample time for pressing various tidbits upon the trio of guests,

meaning the Winklejohns, urging them to eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow they must pound the pigskin once more!

But then, having played his part well, the worthy fellow watched his chance to steal away and join his heart-brother, Austin Leonard, who had kept well in the background ever since that ill-timed arrival.

Proud, haughty, sensitive to a fault, the Ranger was blaming himself for letting a love which ought to have died the death long ago hurry him so far—too far, as he now bitterly reflected.

"If I didn't know better, pard, I'd call you a blamed fool!" was the blunt salutation given by Sparkler Sam. "Yonder's the apple of your eye, and here you are glooming away like— Oh, git out!"

"Don't—don't try to rub it in, Sam," coldly warned the Ranger.

"I'll rub it in, and then I'll thump it out if nothing less will answer, you monumental donkey! And if it still fails to work—look me straight in the eye, Austin Leonard, if you dare!"

"Well?" coldly demanded the other, as their eyes met in the gloom.

"Why don't you make it well, then? You know you still love Georgia Winklejohn better than life! I dare you to say I'm a liar, Aus!"

Those eyes drooped, and Leonard smothered a groan.

"I knew you couldn't, pard! And now—listen to your Uncle Fuller for a moment, old man!"

"If you don't play clean white; if you don't pluck up courage and come to a full and perfect understanding with Georgia this very evening—"

"She'd scorn me for being such a cur, Sam!"

"Dollars to cents she wouldn't do any such thing, Aus! But, better that than to be thought a cur who didn't dare even show his face in her fair presence! And—I say, old man!"

"Say it, then, Sam."

"Right here you have it in a chunk! If you don't take the chance I'm going to offer, I'll lick you into fiddlestrips, and court the fair damself my own weenty self—so there!"

"I'd rather die a thousand times over than have her give me one glance of scorn, Sam!" huskily muttered his friend.

"I'll insure your life against that sort of death, Aus, and never charge a red cent by way of premium!" briskly declared the Texas Samson. "Now—all eyes open, pardner! See how elegantly I'll upset yonder watch-dog, will you?"

Striding briskly across the firelit space, Sparkler Sam doffed his oddly-ornamented hat to uncle and niece, then suavely spoke:

"Beg your pardon for robbing you of such a delightful companion, Mr. Winklejohn, but I really— Will you accept my arm and escort for a few moments, ma'am?"

A swift flush suffused Georgia's face for a moment, then fled to leave her paler than before; but she rose quickly to her feet, paying no heed to the half-angry remonstrance began by her guardian.

Taking the proffered arm, she moved away into comparative shadow, the Gold-lace Sport chattering briskly enough, yet without saying anything to betray his real object.

Still, it could hardly be a surprise to the maiden when she suddenly found herself once more face to face with the only living man whom she loved.

"Now, little children, try hard to behave yourselves!" said the Gold-lace Sport, as he slipped his arm free and drew back a bit. "Don't let a pack of dirty lies ruin two good lives! Act as your hearts honestly dictate, and I'll look for your thanks later on!"

"Don't—Mr. Sampson!"

"Excuse me, my dear lady!" laughingly denied the jovial scout, drawing still further away as he added: "Two's company, and any more's an abominable crowd! So—I'll play guardian-angel, and with flaming snickersee bar all rude intrusion!"

He moved away in earnest, now, leaving the embarrassed lovers face to face, to work out their fate as best they might. If nothing good came of the venture, he surely would not be in fault!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BARRIER BETWEEN THEM.

As he moved away, Sparkler Sam left a bit of worn paper in the hand of his friend, and by touch alone Austin Leonard knew that this was the note he had bidden the Gold-lace Sport give Miss Winklejohn on his return to the place where she was staying.

For a few seconds he stood in silence, hardly knowing how to break the ice, yet feeling that he surely ought to improve the opportunity thus gallantly won for him.

Then he spoke in low, far from firm tones:

"I hold here the last word I ever had from your hand, Miss Winklejohn. I know it by heart; I've read it over and over thousands of times. It bears your name yet—well, if you can honestly tell me you wrote it of your own free will, then—I'll bother you no more!"

Georgia said nothing, simply because she feared to trust her voice. And after a brief silence, the Ranger slowly repeated the cruel sentences so indelibly impressed upon his brain.

No need to transcribe those lines here. Enough that it was, as he had so often denounced it, a bit of malignancy such as only a heartlessly vicious brain could have imagined, much less transcribe.

Georgia listened in silence, her drooping figure gradually drawing more erect, although the gloom surrounding them concealed her changing features. But when Austin Leonard ceased speaking, she coldly asked:

"Did you really credit me with writing that—and to you, sir?"

"I fought against belief, but what else could I think? It was in your hand, and your signature was appended! I could not be deceived in either one or the other! And then—you sent back my notes, my gifts, even the ring by which—"

"I sent all those back, yes," interrupted the maiden, "but I never wrote or signed any such wicked lies! I never even—"

A quick grasp, then Austin Leonard caught her in his arms, pressing her to his heaving bosom with almost savage force, force, raining hot kisses upon her face, her lips!

And—for just that first moment or two, Georgia actually appeared to enjoy the brutal treatment, too!

Only for a brief space, then she broke from his embrace with a power one would hardly expect in a woman.

"Wait, Austin! Is this the only cause you have? Is this your sole reason for sending me such cruel words?"

"I? Cruel words?" echoed the Ranger, plainly bewildered. "Surely you never—Georgia, who has come between us so damnable?"

"I fear—Uncle Julius was—"

"That malicious curl!" savagely growled the lover, taking a step toward the camp-fires; only one step, for as she divined his desperate purpose, Georgia caught his arm, speaking hurriedly:

"Don't—for my sake, Austin!"

He caught her in his arms once more, and the maiden proved her love by yielding to his clasp. And as his hot lips met hers, the caress was returned in kind!

"Let him go!" hoarsely muttered Leonard fairly intoxicated with bliss after so long an abstinence. "I can laugh his devilish arts to scorn now! I can—Georgia, my angel! Tell me—just once—say that you still love me?"

"I have never ceased loving you, Austin, even when I believed you were false to me and to your solemn vows," gravely yet blissfully whispered the maiden.

Her reward came in sweet payment, but after a little the lover said in low, happy murmurs:

"Let them go, darling! You and I—all the world belongs to us, now! You love—I worship you now, even as I have all along! Even when I fought hardest against it, trying to curse you instead!"

"Oh, Austin!"

"Let it pass, darling! Now I've got you, and we'll never part again, no matter what—Georgia!"

For once again the maiden slipped swiftly

from his grasp, holding him back with strong if little hands while she hurriedly spoke:

"Wait, Austin! It cuts me to the very heart to say it, dearest, but I must! We will never again misunderstand each other, but we must part in the morning!"

"Never! I'll never risk you in such treacherous hands as—"

"It must be so, Austin," interposed the woman with an increase of gravity, still resisting his embrace. "In dying, my poor father left me a sacred trust, and I have sworn to fulfill it."

"I will help you keep that oath, darling, but don't ask me to lose you again!"

"I don't ask it, dear," with a fleeting smile. "That would be to me a death-blow, indeed!"

"Then—say you'll marry me as soon as we can find a parson or legal officer, little woman?"

"I will marry you as soon as I have performed this sacred duty, Austin," steadily amended the maiden, the darkness hiding her charming blushes and lending her the requisite courage to speak so plainly. "But while that trust remains unfulfilled, darling, I cannot promise more."

"But you'll let me help you? You'll tell me how I can help you?"

"Not even so much, dear, for I am forbidden. Would I deny you this, unless I was bound by a pledge to my dead father, Austin?"

"Yet—if I might only share your burden, Georgia!"

"When the day comes that I may speak, be sure I'll hide naught from you, Austin. But until then—until my trust is fulfilled—you must bear with me. You will, dearest?"

Her hands were upon his shoulders, now, and her lips lifted up to meet their love-mates.

Who could deny aught under such circumstances?

"How long must I wait, Georgia?" a bit huskily asked Leonard.

"That is as a kind Heaven wills, Austin! I know not; I only know that you will not be alone in welcoming the day which leaves me free to say in the face of all the world, what I now say to you: I love you, my—husband!"

With the title still warm upon her lips, Georgia broke away, hurrying back to the camp-fire, seating herself near her Uncle Julius, with naught to betray her newly-resurrected joy save the rich color burning in cheeks and upon lips which still tingled with love-kisses.

Edgar Winklejohn scowled blackly as the handsome young Ranger passed him by, shortly after; but Leonard gave him no heed, seating himself at the fire where Sparkler Sam was once more eating, drinking and making all around him merry.

As the evening grew older, preparations were made for repose, the Gold-lace Sport joining his pard in shaping a hut of branches, covered over with dry moss, a bed of the "graybeard" rendering the interior more comfortable.

This, of course, was intended for the one lady present, but before she took full possession, Austin contrived to lure her away from the main crowd once more, for a last good-night.

That was put in true loverly shape, and the maiden was not ashamed to respond in kind, either!

Then Leonard sought for further confirmation, not of her love, but as to the completeness of their reconciliation.

"You promise to let me know the earliest moment you are free from this trust which stands between us as a barrier, darling?" he whispered, clasping her hands tightly, loth to let her go.

"I promise, Austin."

"And all is well between us, now?"

"All is well, my love!"

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"Amen! And—you will never doubt me again, Austin?"

"Never again, Georgia! Neither devils nor saints can part or make fresh trouble between us now, my angel!"

He would have added action to words, but the maiden drew back, hastily whispering:

"Uncle—cousin! Don't quarrel—for my sake, dear!"

Her intuition was correct, for the Winklejohns, father and son, came hurrying that way, still hoping to avert a full explanation, or, if that was impossible now, to have the quarrel pass with as few witnesses as might be.

"Good-night, Georgia, and pleasant dreams be thine!" said Leonard, making his words especially distinct for the benefit of his enemies as they hurried up.

Then he bowed to Julius Winklejohn, giving a brief glimpse of his white teeth as he spoke:

"I'm feeling too near heaven for quarreling, just now, sir, so—may your sleep be without dreams or nightmare, Mr. Winklejohn!"

He strode away, laughing softly as he caught a muttered oath from Edgar's lips, and though he tried hard to hide his happy emotions as he came into the fire-glow, Sparkler Sam read the truth in that face, and soon took occasion to let fall a half-malicious whisper:

"Shall I go kick myself again, pardner? Am I such an old crank, after all?"

Leonard made no reply in words, but he grasped a hand with hearty fervor, and there was something suspiciously like tears moistening his dark eyes as they met that quizzical gaze.

"All right, pardner, and I forgive ye everything else, now you've come back to your senses once more!" chuckled the Gold-lace Sport.

The rest of the night passed without event calling for mention, but at least one man in them all never so much as thought of closing eyes in slumber; and not even the ghost of an enemy could have approached that rude little hut unseen by loving eyes!

The camp was astir bright and early in the morning, and even before the sun showed its earliest rays of gold, appetizing odors were floating upward on the fresh air.

The morning meal was quickly disposed of, and then the united party got under headway, for their routes led in the same direction for several miles, in fact did not diverge until a far-away glimpse could be had of the town whither the Winklejohns were bound.

A mount was supplied both Georgia and Edgar, some of the citizens "doubling up" to meet the necessity.

The now reconciled lovers found opportunity to interchange a few brief sentences in privacy, so far as ears other than their own were concerned; but all they dared venture upon was that and a warm hand-clasp, while so many eyes were within fair range.

During the ride they likewise spoke, occasionally, but either Julius or Edgar Winklejohn took care to keep close alongside the maiden, and so prevented any confidential communication.

When the time came for parting, however, Austin Leonard warmly clasped the hands of his love, caring naught for those who might be looking on; and then he passed around to the elder Winklejohn, speaking in low but stern tones:

"Walk straight from this time on, sir! If aught of harm should befall your niece, I'll call you to strict account!"

"I don't—What do you mean, sir?" angrily demanded the lawyer.

"Simply this: that if harm comes in any shape or manner to Miss Winklejohn, I mean to hold you to a stern account. For—Georgia is my promised wife, you want to understand, sir!"

CHAPTER XXII.

SPARKLER SAM WANTS TO KNOW.

THE Rangers rode hard that day, winding up late in the afternoon with a brief but hot fight in which an irregular force of Mexican raiders fared but poorly at their hands.

As a matter of course, Sparkler Sam played his part to the queen's taste, and close beside the big fellow fought Austin Leonard, neither of the heart-brothers coming out any worse than he went in.

Steel and lead seemed powerless where they rode, save to clear the way for their

good horses; and after the victory was fairly won, the grim old Chief of Rangers openly congratulated the couple before their mates, declaring that with a full regiment of such blades he could clean out all Mexico!

At a fairly early hour the Rangers went into camp for the night, and it was not until after the supper was fairly disposed of that the Gold-lace Sport found a fair opening for the friendly questions which had been simmering in his mind ever since the night before.

Of course he knew that the estranged lovers must have arrived at an amicable understanding of some description, but on just what terms were they now?

"Of course you can tell me it's none of my blame' business," frankly admitted Sparkler Sam, when he had drawn Leonard apart from the rest of the company. "I'm free to own it isn't, but, all the same, I can't help feeling something like a godfather ought to feel—"

"Steady, Samuel!"

"Steady goes, and we'll let the godfather part wait until there's more of a rush!" coolly spoke he of the brilliant garb. "But, pardner, was I all fool when I crowded you into the deadly breach—eh?"

A silent grip made reply, but still Sampson was not wholly satisfied. Leonard was too grave for one perfectly happy, and the jovial scout felt that his duty as comrade was hardly complete so long as even the shadow of a cloud lingered.

"There's a bug in your dumpling somewhere, Aus., or else you're differently constituted from any fellow I ever took the trouble to dissect or analyze!" Sparkler Sam persisted; then dropping his tone of badinage he moved closer to his friend, earnestly adding: "Make a clean breast of it all, old man! It's too late now for you to doubt my friendship, surely?"

"A man was never blessed with a truer friend, Sampson!"

"Prove your belief, then, pardner! What's gone wrong? You made it all up with Miss Winklejohn last night, or your face ought to be arrested for lying!"

"I did, thanks to you, Sam! But—everything is cleared up, now, except—" hesitated the young Ranger.

"Except what?"

"That's just what I can't tell you, Sam!"

"Can't, or won't, Aus.?"

"Can't, because I don't know myself!" a bit impatiently exclaimed Leonard, then going on to repeat what Georgia Winklejohn had said about the sacred trust left her by her father in dying.

Sparkler Sam listened with undisguised eagerness, putting in an occasional question which proved he was groping in his own fashion for a plausible reading of the riddle thus presented; but when Leonard had told all he knew, they were still far from a full comprehension.

"It can't be about property, surely?" half asserted, half queried the Gold-lace Sport, after a brief silence.

"Hardly that. She knows that money or money's worth would never make a difference with me. No, it must be something of greater importance than that, Sam!"

The Gold-lace Sport was doing some busy thinking, just then, and he began to fancy he could detect a glimmer of light penetrating the dark subject.

"I say, pardner, you never told me very much about the W. family, come to look back; did you?"

"Of course you can comprehend why, Sam? It was a very sore subject with me. I told you far more than any other man could have won, though!"

"For which my politest thanks, dear boy! Does that soreness still exist, though?"

"No longer, thanks to you, Sam!"

"Good enough! Somehow I'm feeling terribly genealogical this evening, and nothing shorter than a liberal dose of Winklejohnism can set me at rest. So—how about the late Julian?"

"What do you want to know, first, Sam?"

"Well, bunch the family, then! Of course Julian had a wife, since he left a charming daughter behind! Ah, you lucky dog!"

"May you know for yourself just how lucky, Sam!" a bit unsteadily spoke the young Ranger, with another warm grip of hand; then adding in quicker tones: "Of

course Julian Winklejohn must have married, as you say, but Georgia's mother died years ago."

"You're dead-sure she did die, then?"

"Of course I am sure! What are you trying to get at, Sam?"

"There's no possibility of a divorce, then? Nor a separation, when Miss Winklejohn was a child?" persisted the Gold-lace Sport, reluctant to abandon the wild fancy which had so oddly struck his busy brain.

But Austin Leonard shook his head, decidedly. Nothing of the sort could possibly be entertained, for Georgia herself had often spoken to him of her dead mother.

"And she never had a young sister, for instance?"

"Nor that, either," with equal decision. "Georgia is an only child, and her father was a widower long before I formed their acquaintance," earnestly assured the young Ranger.

"You are certain of all that, pardner?"

"Yes. What makes you stick to it so keenly, Sam?"

"Well, I always did tote a bit of bull-dog under my coat, pardner! And the wife: how did she knock under? I mean, of what did she die?"

Leonard shook his head by way of answer.

"When did she die, then?"

"I can't tell you that, either, Sam. All I know is just what I have told you! Julian Winklejohn was a widower, with a single child, Georgia."

"Did you ever see her tombstone, even?" persisted the Gold-lace Sport, with an earnestness which seemed to grow rather than lessen under discouragement.

Leonard shifted seat until he could more fairly scan that face, but nothing he saw there could lessen his wonder, and once more he asked:

"What are you trying to get at, anyway, Sam?"

"Well, that's a question easier asked than answered," frankly admitted the Sport, with a half-laugh. "Maybe you'll think I'm going cracked, Aus., but I more than half believe I've run up against a younger sister of your Georgia."

"What? That's nonsense, man alive!"

"Is it, though? Just let me tell you something, old man! I hated to let even a true pard like you know what a monumental ass I could make of myself when I gave full swing to this blessed clapper of mine! But now—here goes, just for luck!"

Whereupon Sparkler Sam gave a frank history of his introduction to "the Little Kid," Rhoda Maynard, together with what took place at his different brief calls at her home.

He spoke of the wonderful resemblance the girl bore to Miss Winklejohn, in everything save age and womanly development; but even that difference was not so great.

"I don't think there can be more than a couple of years difference between the two," he said, gravely. "Your Georgia is—about what?"

"Nineteen her last birthday."

"And my Little Kid should measure about seventeen; correct!" decided the Gold-lace Sport, with growing interest. "Age would n't interfere, anyway! And then—what made the old lady show such strong interest in the name of Winklejohn? And why did it prove such a sickening blow to her when I told her it was Julius, not Julian Winklejohn who had come to town?"

"She didact like that, then?"

"You wager your delicious existence she just did, pardner! And even more. I took Miss Georgia past the Maynard home, just for luck, as I told you before. And the widow swooned away again, merely at sight of the young lady! Now—what does it all figure up, pardner?"

Leonard had no answer ready, but still he shook his head at that preposterous idea: Mrs. Winklejohn was dead, and Georgia was an only child!

"That's all right, pardner, if you only think it hard enough," grimly retorted the big fellow, falling back to a more careless attitude for the time being.

"Because I fail to see how it can read any different, Sam. I am morally certain of my facts, while you—are trying to make facts out of the airiest of all fancies!"

"Am I, though?"

"You certainly are, old fellow!"

"Well, maybe yes, maybe no. Take it how you like, pardner, there's something mighty curious about the way things showed up, over yonder. Of course if Mrs. W. is really dead, and J. W. was never divorced, nor separated from his wife, my little theory goes bust; but—"

"You'll find it is all fancy, Sam; take my word for it!"

"If I do, I surely will, of course. But, all the same, I'm going to dive deeper into the mystery, even if I break my cabeza against a rock!"

"I'll get another scouting detail, and then I'll solve the riddle or break a leg trying!"

With that declaration, the Gold-lace Sport rose to his feet and lounged across to the cheery camp-fire.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TWO KNAVES WELL MATCHED.

LATE in the afternoon of the day following this confidential chat between the two Ranger pards, another consultation took place which must find a record in this connection.

Oddly enough, it was held at the very patch of cover out of which poor Tom Billson had risen with his friendly warning to Sparkler Sam of breakers ahead.

On this occasion it was a regular appointment, made by Diego Sandoval and kept by Julius Winklejohn.

The Mexican was first on the scene, and was lying well under cover when the old lawyer hurried up, casting uneasy looks around like one whose conscience is ill at ease, or a wrong-doer who dreads detection.

A low whistle warned Winklejohn that his man was present, and with a snarl of half anger he spoke:

"Why couldn't you do as you did before: come to the house, not drag me out here like—"

"That is growling enough, my good friend," coolly interrupted the Mexican, speaking without hardly an accent that could betray his nationality, even as he had temporarily discarded his flashy suit of velvet, silk and china crape for a garb less conspicuous.

"Well, let that pass, then. Now—what have you decided upon?"

"First, repeat your wishes, my good friend. I am to aid you, not you me. Hence it is from your lips that the first words should issue."

"What's the use running it all over?" muttered Winklejohn, casting an uneasy look around them, as though he feared the coming of enemies.

"That there may be no occasion for grieving over too little comprehension in the future, senor," coolly declared the bandit, shrugging his broad shoulders. "So—you wish to get rid of the senorita; yes?"

"You know all that, Sandoval! And you also know that you'd fight like a panther if I tried to draw back that very prize from your teeth!"

Sandoval chuckled softly at this, but he made no denial.

"Why then do you think it necessary to waste so much time in idle chatter?" irritably continued the lawyer, still guarding against the chance of any person coming upon their rendezvous unobserved by his keen eyes. "Why not say in one word: done!"

"Because it yet remains to do, senor! And, besides, there is one little point we omitted to fully agree upon, before," came the cool rejoinder.

"What point was that?"

"Your son, senor."

"What of him?"

"He must bear the senorita company over the river, senor?"

"Why so?"

"Surely one so far-sighted as yourself, senor, ought to have foreseen so much? Is it not so, then? Well, permit me to make it clear for your eyes, senor!"

Even now the Mexican bandit appeared to be in no especial haste to explain, but Julius Winklejohn forced back his impatience, rightly believing that all this was meant to make him lose temper, and so be at greater disadvantage in this risky negotiation.

As Winklejohn maintained silence, Sandoval was forced to speak on:

"It runs like this, senor," laying off each

point as made with tip of finger on dusky palm. "I am to steal away the senorita. It is to be thought she has eloped with a favored lover, or—"

"No!" quickly interrupted Winklejohn. "That is out of the question now, after what has happened. You must take the other tack, Sandoval!"

"You see, senor, there is nothing like a little confidential conversation, after all!" declared the bandit, with a show of his teeth at this admission. "It is only a fool who plays a game for heavy stakes without looking carefully at the cards he holds!"

"I know; go on, man!"

"Very well; I go on—thus:

"I am to remove the senorita, for the purpose of ransom, say. How am I to send back my terms? Who is to risk explaining just how, why, and by whom the deed is performed? Your noble son, senor, of course!"

"You mean that he must go with you, Sandoval?"

"As a captive worth many yellow ounces—yes!"

"And he is to bring back your terms, you say?"

"Precisely so, senor! Is it not an improvement on the other idea?"

"Possibly it is, but—what sort of word is he to bring back?"

Julius Winklejohn spoke slowly, almost painfully. Each word appeared to rasp his throat in its passage, and even that deepening twilight failed to entirely mask his loss of color.

Sandoval gave another brief show of his teeth, then asked:

"It would grieve you dreadfully, senor, never to see the senorita again? You would gladly strip yourself of every *peso* in order to ransom her from the evil clutches of the brigands?"

Julius Winklejohn forced a chuckle at this stroke of wit, but it fell far short of mirth or of heartiness. Plainly he felt anxious to get this peculiar interview over with!

"Why make a joke of it, Sandoval? You know only too well that I'm yielding up a fortune to you, just to feel dead sure she never will come back—alive!"

"You are paying me to remove this girl from your pathway, then? You honestly admit that you desire her death?" asked Sandoval, with brutal frankness.

Julius Winklejohn flashed uneasy looks around on all sides, but saw nothing to confirm his ugly suspicions; and then he likewise let fall even the frail pretense of a mask so far worn.

"Yes! I want you to take the girl; do what you please with her, just so she never turns up to give me further trouble! And—of course I must have positive proofs of her death!"

"In order to claim her fortune, as next of kin, no doubt?"

"What difference can that make to you?" surlily demanded the lawyer-guardian, his black eyes glittering evilly. "You not only get the girl you say you prize so highly, but you also get full possession of the silver mines her father left, over the border. Surely that is pay sufficient for even one so extortionate as Diego Sandoval?"

"It is rich pay, senor, and I am more than content with what falls to my share," quickly assured the Mexican. "But that is why I insist on carrying off your son, as well. He can bring back the proof you require in order to secure your share of the plunder; and in no other way can so well be hidden from all men the exact part played by the Winklejohn family."

Diego Sandoval spoke with earnest decision, and the old lawyer felt strongly impressed by his shrewd reasoning. After all, this would be an improvement on the original scheme.

"Let it be that way, then! I'll post my son, and—When and how do you expect to act, Sandoval?"

"Are you in such great haste, senor?"

"Yes. The sooner you turn the trick the better I'll like it!" declared Winklejohn, with vicious emphasis. "The very Old Scratch has got into the girl, and unless we win the game in a rush, I'm not so certain we can win it at all!"

"What has gone wrong, senor?"

For answer, Julius Winklejohn briefly related the events which followed the attempted kidnapping, which he declared was done solely for the purpose of extorting a heavy ransom. And he felt a bit easier as he took note of how viciously Sandoval scowled at mention of a lover, Austin Leonard.

"I know him! Some day we will meet, and then—"

A savage pantomime completed the threat, but Winklejohn paid scant attention to either words or gestures; for just then the merry clatter of horses' hoofs came to his ears, and looking past the clump of bushes, he caught sight of two horsemen approaching town from the distant hills.

A vicious glitter stole into his black eyes as he gazed, and then one set of sinewy fingers tightly gripped an arm as he hissing muttered to his comrade in trickery:

"Look, Sandoval! There he is now!"

They each recognized Austin Leonard in the nearest one of the two horsemen, but the Mexican's gaze was fixed upon the other: big, massive, gaily-triggered-out Parker Sampson!

"I see—thrice accursed devil!" savagely grated the bandit, drawing a revolver from his belt and bringing it to a level just as Sparkler Sam broke into a jolly, rollicking laugh.

"Are you crazy, man?" muttered Winklejohn, grasping hand and weapon on the instant. "Don't shoot! You couldn't kill and—"

"It is true, unfortunately!" muttered Sandoval, yielding to prudence far more than to that nervous grasp. "Go, thou cursed one! Go, until the blessed hour strikes which will sound thy death-knell! And this is the hand that shall sound thy doom, devil of all devils!"

The two Rangers rode unsuspectingly on into town, plainly heading for the Shamrock Hotel; and not until they were beyond pistol-range did either one of that evil pair break the silence with words.

Then the Mexican turned eyes toward the lawyer, coldly saying:

"You asked me when I would be ready to strike, senor?"

"Yes! The longer we wait, the greater the risk, as you must admit."

"There is no need of waiting longer, senor, provided you are ready to play your part. That is the main reason for my asking you to meet me here, this evening so early."

"I am ready at any hour, Sandoval!"

"Good! Then the blow will fall this very night! You will have all in readiness, then, just as we agreed upon the other day?"

"Everything! And—why not do it up brown, Sandoval? Why not kill those two devils, as well? If not, they'll chase you like bloodhounds!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SPARKLER SAM TRIES TO FIND OUT.

ANXIOUS to test the odd fancy which had so powerfully assailed his mind, Sparkler Sam lost little time in asking for the scouting detail, and as he was just then in particular favor with his captain, the wish was granted so promptly that, man-like, Samuel asked another on top of it!

In consequence both Sampson and Leonard left the main force of Rangers on a perilous if important duty; but that performed to the best of their ability, the comrades felt fully justified in shifting their route far enough to take in the town which just then contained so much of vital interest to both of the scouts.

Hence it came about that the two Rangers were sighted by the pair of conspirators as they drew near their destination.

Sparkler Sam led the way direct to the Shamrock Hotel where he had quartered himself before, and turning their horses over to the "utility man" employed by Landlord Maloney, the friends were shortly after disposing of a hearty meal in the long dining-room.

The Gold-lace Sport was recognized by everybody he chanced to come within eyerange of, as a matter of course; but he had little to say, and instead of inviting notoriety as customary, he seemed inclined to be exclusive, and as soon as supper was fairly disposed of, he led the way to his former quarters on the second floor.

With the door closed and locked, Sparkler Sam at once plunged into the subject which most deeply interested himself, if not his partner.

"Right here's where you're to stop, pardner, until I've made a bit of a scout by my lonesome! You'll agree, of course?"

"You're going to surprise the 'Little Kid,' are you?" asked Leonard with a half-smile.

"Let up on that if you please, old man!" with a counterfeit frown. "I'm not thinking of poaching on your preserves, anyway."

"You'll not go too far, Sam, I hope? Remember it's only a fancy on your part, and a fancy too wild and preposterous for any use!"

"I hit a fancy the other day which seemed even wilder, Aus., and yet see how rich was the mineral I struck!" rather pointedly retorted the Gold-lace Sport. "You should be the last man on earth to sneer at my wild ideas, old fellow!"

"I beg your pardon, Sam, but—"

"Never mention it, my boy! Now—remember! Here you are, and right here you are to stay until I come back. I'll not be gone longer than I can help, of course, but—you'll agree, Leonard?"

The young Ranger gave his promise, and then the big fellow left the chamber, passing down the stairs and out of the hotel without calling inconvenient notice his way.

Sparkler Sam quickened his steps when once fairly clear of the Shamrock, and only the shades of night concealed the bright, eager glow which came into his big blue eyes as he turned toward the humble home which owned Widow Maynard as mistress.

A wild, even crazy fancy Austin Leonard had termed it, but nevertheless Parker Sampson had determined to press the matter home without unnecessary delay, and he had carefully prepared each move to be taken, as far as one can look into the future.

As the Gold-lace Sport turned into the side street where stood the Maynard home, he caught his breath sharply, for there was a faint glow saluting his eyes, and he knew that his mission would not be wholly without reward.

"What will she say? How will she look? Will she let me—Steady, boy! Don't you begin playing fool so early in the game!"

Sparkler Sam sharply chided himself, yet there was a queer thrill in his veins as he drew near the building, and he was blushing like a bashful schoolboy as he lifted hand to tap upon the paneled door.

He caught a quick, light footfall, then the barrier swung open, and he stood face to face with "the Little Kid!"

"Good-evening, Miss Maynard! May I ask if your mother has recovered from her indisposition?" briskly spoke the Gold-lace Sport, religiously sticking to his prepared programme.

"She is better, thank you, Mr. Sampson. Will you walk in, please?"

This, too, was very nearly what Sparkler Sam had marked down, and he accepted the invitation promptly enough.

Mrs. Maynard was ready with a cordial greeting, really looking less like an invalid at first glance; but as the scout took a seat and had time to make a more critical examination, he saw that at least a portion of her good looks came from a hidden fever.

Sampson was far more at his ease with mother than with daughter, thanks to the humiliating mistake he had made on first meeting Rhoda; but it was no part of his plans to bluntly demand whether or no she was any relation to the Winklejohns, either by marriage or through blood-ties.

As he himself might have said, there were more ways than one of skinning a cat; and having fairly broken the ice, he turned toward Rhoda instead, speaking of the odd chance which had brought two long estranged lovers together.

It all came about so naturally, too, that even one of suspicious nature could hardly take alarm at his maneuvers.

It began with an apology for not calling as promised on his return from that forced ride, the other day; a promise which he certainly would have made good, but for the startling tidings which met him as he entered town; the return of the horse ridden by Miss Winklejohn, badly wounded by a gun-

shot, which only too plainly spoke of personal peril.

He briskly told of the trailing, the meeting with a force of Texan Rangers in whose company the missing couple were found; and then he went on to tell of Austin Leonard and his sore heart-troubles.

"A truer, whiter lad never drew the breath of life than Austin Leonard!" he declared, loyally. "I've known him like a brother, and learned to love him heap sight harder than most brothers can love, I fancy! But when I saw him let the lady pass without making dead sure of her, I felt like jumping on his neck with both feet—so there!"

Sparkler Sam was telling the little story to Rhoda, apparently giving no heed to the widow; but he kept a covert watch and felt a growing conviction that his "crazy fancy" was not all madness!

If so, why should Mrs. Maynard betray such intense interest in the story, while striving to mask her emotions? What made her breath come so sharply, so feverishly? Why were her thin hands so tightly clasped together in her lap?

Sparkler Sam had told his story well up to this point, giving an idea of foul play lying back of that estrangement, yet mentioning no names save those of the lovers; but now he thought it full time to put his fancy to the test and quickly told how Georgia Winklejohn had kept her lover at bay because of a sacred trust bequeathed her by her father in dying.

A low, painful gasp escaped the widow at this, but Sparkler Sam was not quite ready to ask his momentous question, and pretending not to notice that increased agitation, he added:

"Now, that's why I blame Austin! What possible cause could Miss Winklejohn have to deny him his lovely rights? What trust can be so sacred as to hinder a man from marrying the woman he loves, and who declared she loves him just as hard?"

There came no answer from either mother or daughter, and Sparkler Sam spoke on:

"If 't was me—think I'd take such an answer? Never a bit of it, Miss Rhoda! I'd make my love my wife, whether she would or not. And then we'd have two heads with one heart—all the better for carrying out a sacred trust, say I!"

"Don't you think I'm right, Mrs. Maynard?" he asked, turning abruptly toward the widow. "Can you guess what sort of trust is so sacred that—steady, ma'am!"

He broke off abruptly, for the widow turned ghastly pale, swaying in her chair like one swooning if not at the point of death; but his proffered aid was refused, and desperately rallying, the woman faintly spoke:

"I know—you suspect—not now! Come—to-morrow—and I will try to explain what—go, I beseech you, sir!"

Rhoda added her entreaty to that of her mother, and reluctant though he was to leave them while seemingly in such sore need of assistance, to say nothing of his own unsatiated curiosity, Sparkler Sam felt obliged to beat a retreat.

He first secured a definite promise that he might count on a more satisfactory interview the next day, and when he left the house it was with the warm touch of Rhoda's fingers upon his hand.

The Gold-lace Sport went directly back to his chamber, where he found Austin Leonard waiting, really anxious to hear what had happened, in spite of his assumed incredulity.

But the Texas Samson gave him precious little light, coolly bidding him wait until the pear was fully ripe before trying to taste it.

"I'll give you the whole story to-morrow, pardner, but for now—go to bed and go to sleep!"

"In other words, you've made a rank failure, just as I predicted you would!" declared the Ranger, tartly.

"Is that so? Well, you'll sleep all the sounder for being such a wonderful prophet, don't you reckon?" half maliciously mocked the Gold-lace Sport, beginning to doff his garments for the night.

Past experience told Leonard he would only waste time and breath in trying to extort information after that, and with a smothered sigh as he thought of Georgia, still so far although so near, he followed that

example; and less than half an hour later the weary men were soundly sleeping, never once dreaming of the deadly peril which was even then closing in upon them.

For Diego Sandoval and his ruffians were falling to work!

CHAPTER XXV.

SPARKLER SAM'S DEATH-GRAPPLE.

THE night was considerably more than half spent when Sparkler Sam gave a gasping cry and started up in bed, coughing and strangling, his brain throbbing madly, his eyes blinded by a red glow which came from within rather than without.

The chamber was full of acrid smoke, and the heat was increasing rapidly!

Then, before the Gold-lace Sport could fairly recollect himself or his surroundings, a wild cry came from outside the building, sounding the thrilling alarm of midnight fire!

That shout explained it all, and with a roaring shout Sparkler Sam flung himself out of bed, plunging across to the one window, striking his balled hand fiercely against the woodwork, shattering every pane of glass and tearing the sash from its fittings.

This let in a grateful gush of cool air, and leaning far over the sill as he swallowed great draughts, Sampson looked up and down, to right and left, taking in all with clearing vision.

There was no room left for mistakes, now; there was a fire in town, and it just as surely centered at the Shamrock Hotel!

The first warning shout was now answered back by many excited yells, for nothing will so quickly stir up a border town as the cry of fire, particularly where their sole hope of salvation lies in forming a "bucket brigade" to fight the flames.

"Fire, Leonard!" hoarsely cried Sparkler Sam, drawing back with generous thought for his comrade. "This shebang's on fire, and we've got to get a hustle on if we don't want to—pardner, I say!"

But his sudden fears were banished as Leonard made answer, nearly strangled by smoke yet worth a score of dead men yet!

"Take your guns—throw your duds outside!" cried the Sport, but jumping into his own garments with practiced speed. "Maybe it's another trick to down us by—Steady, boy!"

Leonard seemed about to fall out through the window, but Sam caught and steadied him, speaking rapidly but distinctly:

"Cool and easy, Aus! There's gobs of time if you only think so; and I'm not so mighty sure that—Steady, boy! I'll drop you out, first, then you want to get your guns ready for use."

"A trap, you reckon?" asked Leonard, rapidly recovering there where the fresh air struck him; for he had been more nearly suffocated than his partner in bed.

"It wouldn't be the first one, anyway!" grimly muttered the gold-lace Sport, looking keenly out, but able to see little now the smoke and flames were rising so rapidly. "Eyes open, now! And—steady, boy!"

With hardly a visible effort he swung the young Ranger out through the opening, leaning far over to lessen the drop, then opening his fingers.

Leonard struck the earth safely, and hurried away from the side of the building, for flames were eating a passage through that frail wooden shell, and its destruction was but a question of minutes.

Sparkler Sam waited barely long enough to feel fairly confident that Leonard had escaped without material injury, then took his own turn, hanging at full length of his arms from the widow-sill to steady himself for the by no means contemptible drop.

Just then the report of rifle or pistol was heard, and Sparkler Sam gave a fierce cry as he felt the lead sting keenly!

There was no room left for doubting its vicious intent, for the missile tore through skin and flesh just below his left armpit, and almost certainly would have pierced his heart but for that unexpected swaying on his part to avoid a rising tongue of fire.

As he gave that fierce cry, the Gold-lace Sport let go all holds, shooting downward through the smoke and flames, striking earth with a heavy shock that destroyed his balance and sent him tumbling endlong.

At the same instant a crouching figure leaped forward, striking as he came, the

ruddy glow reflecting from a bright blade and making clear the evil purpose of the wielder.

Again good-luck saved the Sport, for he was taken entirely by surprise; but he was scrambling to his feet as the vicious assault came, and that rapid movement foiled the deadly stroke.

The steel found flesh, however, and a savage roar burst from the big fellow's lungs as he felt the keen biting.

He turned and grappled with his assailant, the movement tearing away the weapon from hand as from wound, and then both men fell to the ground in a writhing, struggling heap.

Austin Leonard, confused by the shock of his drop, and nearly blinded by his swift passage through those fire-tinged wreaths of smoke, staggered away from the blazing building until clear of danger from that source.

He dimly remembered the warning given by his mate, but his senses were still too greatly disturbed for keenness of sight or quickness of apprehension.

He was startled by that shot which seemed to come from no great distance in his rear, and thinking it possibly had been aimed at his own life, he jerked weapon from belt and wheeled in his tracks, winking and blinking, looking in vain for particular foe.

Then the savage cry from Sparkler Sam's lips made the young Ranger wheel again, just in time to glimpse that venomous assault with cold steel.

An angry yell escaped his own lips as he sprung forward to lend a helping hand; but his aid was hardly necessary, so far as that particular enemy was concerned.

That mad death grapple lasted hardly a half-score seconds, for, keenly stung by his wounds, Sparkler Sam was fairly wild with rage, and few men ever drew the breath of life who could hope to cope with him on anything like equal grounds, then.

With a grip which seemed to crush muscles and bones alike, he swung his assailant aside, then sprung to his feet, giving a deep roar as he whirled the assassin high in air, one hand gripping shoulder, the other fastened upon an ankle.

A single shrill, agonized yell for help burst from the luckless wretch, but he was granted time for nothing more.

One savage swing around that leonine head, then the Texas Samson hurled his enemy fairly against the side of the blazing building.

Above all else came the sound of that awful collision, then the breathless body rebounded, falling in a crushed and helpless heap upon the ground, while hungry tongues of fire curled out from the building, as though eager to feast upon flesh and blood.

The instant he let go his hold upon the unfortunate knave, Sparkler Sam whirled about, ready for other enemies, and only a hasty shout from Austin Leonard kept the enraged Hercules from fastening upon him.

"Don't—Look out, Sam!"

Just time for those few words, and the swift warning was blended with pistol-crack, for other armed men were rushing that way, sending a hasty volley by way of pointing their deadly intentions.

"Hal hal!" roared the Gold-lace Sport, as he took note, shaking his head as a bullet plucked viciously at his yellow locks. "Come, ye devils! The more the merrier, for—Chew lead, you curs from Tophet!"

Side by side the two pards stood, their revolvers barking rapidly as the enemy made their savage rush, shooting as they came, seemingly bent on crushing the pair down by mere weight of numbers.

But a portion of the hotel gave way to fire, letting out a broad sheet of flames which barred the way for a few seconds, making it blind shooting at the very best.

And then the alarm spread further, citizens taking up the wild cries and proving the entire town was pouring forth upon the scene of excitement.

No doubt this had much to do with that sudden repulse, but at sound of a shrill whistle the armed men scattered quickly, leaving the two pards comparatively unhurt despite the number of shots fired.

Sparkler Sam made a dash through the smoke and flames, but only to lose sight of those flying shadows, and knowing how

difficult it would be for even himself to single out any one of their assailants after once losing sight of them, he abandoned the effort for the time being.

By this time he knew there was no hope for the Shamrock or its drinking annex, the Harp of Erin. Already the flames were eating through the roof of the hotel, and every window was a roaring furnace of flames.

As he looked, his gaze fell upon the body of his first assailant lying just as it had fallen in that awful rebound.

The flames had caught at the carcass, and a portion of its clothing broke into a blaze as he looked, sending the Sport forward with a mighty bound, his grip fastening upon those broad shoulders and dragging the helpless wretch far away from the fire.

Not until those very moments had the Gold-lace Sport given thought to why he should be so savagely assaulted, or by whom those treacherous blows were dealt; but the same glance which showed him that rising tongue of flame, likewise revealed the gilt braid and silver buttons of a Mexican garb!

Pausing when at a safe distance from the fire, Sparkler Sam knelt down beside his prey, brushing away the blood and soot which masked that dark and distorted face.

A husky groan, a snarling curse, a sharp clicking of dog-like teeth as they tried to meet in the hand that touched his face!

"Who are you? Who set you at my life?" sternly demanded Sampson; but the Mexican merely gave a low gasp, then straightened out with a quiver which could not be mistaken.

"He's dead!" declared Sparkler Sam, rising to his feet and adding: "One of Cortina's Lambs, for rocks! Come, pard! To the Winklejohn house, for there's the Old Boy to pay this night, or I'm a howling liar!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SPARKLER SAM ON THE TRAIL.

ODDLY enough, Austin Leonard had never once given thought to possible peril menacing his loved one, but now dire conviction seemed to seize upon his soul, and, forgetting all else, he urged Sparkler Sam to show him the nearest route to the Winklejohn residence.

"Come, then! It's big odds Yellow Diego has a hand in this pie, but if we don't turn it to blood-pudding on his lips I'll eat my hat!" the Gold-lace Sport cried, setting off at full run.

If their movements were noticed at all, no one attempted to check or bar their rush, for now the whole town seemed wild, flocking toward the fire as though that left room for no other thought.

Taking the most direct route available, Sparkler Sam quickly gained a point from whence he could catch an early glimpse of the Winklejohn residence, and gave a little cry of relief as he slackened his breakneck pace.

"What is it? Where is it, Sam?" hoarsely demanded the lover, whose abruptly awakened fears were not so easily lulled to rest.

"Yonder's the house, and no show of a rumpus, please the pigs!" answered the Gold-lace Sport, in half-abashed tones. "Maybe I was an ass for jumping on Sandoval, but—"

"Come! We ought to make sure that all's right with them!" impatiently urged the younger scout. "Show me which place it is and I'll go by my lonesome if you don't—"

"Oh, I'll go 'long, pardner, if only to hold the old man off your back while you hug—The deuce!"

Sparkler Sam hardly meant just that, for the final words came in a fierce ejaculation as he caught sight of a suspicious circumstance.

Hurrying toward the house rented by the Winklejohns, he just then saw that the front door was standing ajar, and though no light shone through, no sound or outcry came from the interior, he more than ever suspected foul play.

"What is it, Sam?" pantingly asked Leonard, and the big fellow hurriedly made answer:

"Devil's work, or I'm a liar! All eyes open, pard! If you see any person trying to make a sneak of it, hail and then plug him if he don't throw up instanter!"

Sparkler Sam had barely time to rattle off these words when he reached the front of the building, and shoving wide the door which he found ajar, he cried out, sharply:

"Hello, the house! Winklejohn—I say, Winklejohn!"

From the rear came wild shouts and confused sounds, but never a cry or word from that dark interior.

"Guard yourself, pardner!" grimly warned Sampson, his own weapons ready for use as he sprung over the threshold, closely followed by Leonard, whose loverly fears could no longer be held in check, and whose voice repeated the name of his beloved, over and over.

Still no answer came back, and with his free hand Sparkler Sam drew a match sharply along one thigh, holding the little torch above his head while he flashed a keen look around the room.

He failed to catch sight of either of the Winklejohns, but he saw an oil-lamp across the room, and crossing over he lit the wick before his match burned down to his fingers.

As he did this, Leonard sprung to open a door which led into another room, flinging it wide, then giving a hoarse cry as he stopped short, staring at a human figure lying upon the floor just ahead of his feet.

Sparkler Sam flashed the lamplight that way, and quickly recognized the motionless shape, as was proved by his words:

"The old man! Looks like he'd caught it hard, too! But—where's the girl? She comes first, and—steady, pardner!"

Easy enough to say, but just then Austin Leonard was past heeding even if he heard.

A choking cry parting his lips, the anguished lover rushed from one room to another, calling upon his sweetheart and searching in every nook and corner for the missing maiden.

Sparkler Sam moved as swiftly as possible without extinguishing the light, and it took only a few minutes to convince him of the worst: Georgia Winklejohn was surely gone!

On every side could be seen traces of rude handling, as though bold and rapacious robbers had ransacked the premises in quest of valuable plunder.

The different chambers bore traces of all this, and it was evident that Winklejohn had retired at or near the customary hour, to be surprised by the raiders while in bed if not sleeping.

Leonard seemed stunned at first when he failed to find Georgia, but the younger Ranger quickly rallied when Sparkler Sam spoke of looking after Julius Winklejohn, in the room below stairs.

"The treacherous devil!" fiercely breathed the lover, making a fierce break in that direction. "I'll murder him by inches if he's had aught to do with this foul outrage!"

"Steady, lad!" and Sparkler Sam caught an arm, holding him in check while they hurried down stairs and to the room in which the old lawyer was lying.

The two pards saw now what they had failed to note before: that Julius Winklejohn was bound, hand and foot, his mouth covered with a folded bandage, while the lamplight showed them a ghastly-looking wound across his skull, blood from which dyed his gray hairs red, and then formed a little pool on the floor!

Putting the lamp down where it would throw all the light needed, Sparkler Sam knelt beside the bound figure, shaking a shoulder vigorously, but without eliciting any sign of life.

To all seeming the old man was a corpse, but Sampson quickly learned the contrary; senses might be missing, but life was surely there!

He looked at the wound, finding it less severe than it seemed to be at first glance.

He probed the gash with his finger-tips, making sure the skull was not fractured, and at the same time causing a shiver of pain to run over the injured man!

Drawing knife the Gold-lace Sport quickly cut away all bonds, then again shook the old man, but with no better success than before.

An angry frown wrinkled his brows at this, and he spoke sharply to Leonard:

"Pass me the lamp, pardner! I'll scorch his feet a bit! Nothing like *that* for bringing—Hello, mister!"

With a faint groan and gasp Julius Winklejohn opened his eyes, like one just recovering his senses, and a flood of questions poured upon him from both pair of lips.

For a few minutes he seemed too utterly dazed to either answer or comprehend, but then Sparkler Sam gave him another significant hint to quicken his wits with fairly-good effect.

Once loosened, his tongue ran freely enough, but with all his words came very little information of importance.

He had been roused from sleep by sounds of some description, and rising from bed had come down-stairs to investigate. Then—he had just a fleeting glimpse of one or more persons, after which he was brutally struck down and knew no more until aroused from his stupor by the Gold-lace Sport and his comrade.

Just this, and nothing more!

In vain the two pards questioned him concerning Georgia and his son; Winklejohn could give them no light, and his bitter fears of deadly peril menacing the young couple left him no room for aught else.

Then Austin Leonard pushed Sparkler Sam aside, forcing the old lawyer to meet his burning gaze while he spoke with cold ferocity:

"I believe your treacherous hand lies under all this, Julius Winklejohn! I believe you have schemed to remove my—my darling!"

"I never—why should I do that?" huskily quavered Julius.

"To finger her fortune, you cur! But—mark my words! I'll follow and find her! I'll never rest until I've learned the whole truth! And if aught of harm or wrong has befallen my loved one through your agency, Julius Winklejohn, I'll make you think you're in hell while still alive!"

With this fierce vow the young Ranger fell back, and Sparkler Sam once more tried to glean some inkling of truth from those lips; but if Julius Winklejohn knew more than he had already told, he had the nerve to conceal his knowledge.

Making another and thorough search of that interior without finding aught which would aid them in solving the riddle, the two scouts left the house, seeing what might be learned on the outside.

By this time the fire had destroyed the hotel and saloon where it first broke out, and in addition swallowed up half a score lesser frame buildings before slackening for lack of fresh fuel.

It was generally believed that the fire was incendiary, probably a stroke of revenge on the part of the raiders from across the river; for the two scouts were not long in hearing of strange horsemen being seen in hasty retreat when the fire was raging fiercest.

Acting upon this clew, then, Sparkler Sam struck a promising trail which led toward the lower ford, once before taken Yellow Diego's lawless raiders; and by the time day was dawning, his plans were formed.

Picking out one of the citizens whom he felt confident he could fully trust, Sampson gave him a hastily written note for the Ranger Captain, saying that himself and pard would hit the trail off and follow it home, leaving clear sign for the Rangers to follow at speed.

Dispatching this important message, Sparkler Sam secured a goodly supply of cooked food, then mounted his horse and left town in company with Austin Leonard, heading for the lower ford and never drawing rein until they struck the soil of Old Mexico!

"The fight's on now, pardner!" he grimly declared. "I know where Diego Sandoval holds up, and he's my meat or I'll die reaching for him!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOWN IN HIS TRUE COLORS.

"It was a fair and square bargain, sir, and now—what am I to think?"

"For one thing, think how thankful you ought to be for even a chance to buy your life, senor!"

Edgar Winklejohn gave a fierce gesture,

but swift as thought itself the black muzzle of a revolver stared him squarely in the face, and over that leveled tube came the stern warning:

"Careful, señor! Lift hand or utter threat, even, and I'll scatter your brains to the four winds of heaven!"

Diego Sandoval spoke as though he meant every word which passed his lips, just then, and Winklejohn shrank shivering away.

The greater part of a week had passed by since the burning of the Shamrock Hotel, and Yellow Diego had fairly settled down in this secluded valley to reap the fruits of his carefully planned campaign.

According to the agreement, he had carried off both Georgia and Edgar Winklejohn that night, leaving a picked portion of his force to kill off his Ranger enemies.

That portion of his devilish plot had failed, but not so the rest, to which he devoted his own skill and craft.

He played his part to perfection during the forced retreat to his hiding-place, but once fairly located there, he threw off the mask and showed himself to Winklejohn in his true colors.

Edgar had expressed disgust at so much loss of valuable time, and fairly commanded Sandoval to finish off the work he had agreed to perform. It was then the Mexican bandit coolly declared that the young man had better be thinking how he could raise the price of his life and liberty!

"Why else should I bother with you, fool?" he added, with brutal candor. "Why should I accept the lesser half, when I might as well claim the whole? So—I tell you frankly, señor! Unless you can pay me a fair price for your liberty, I'll have you butchered like a dog!"

In vain Winklejohn reminded him of the agreement made with Georgia's guardian: that he was to have the silver mines for his share, and let Edgar go free, bearing to Texas ample proofs of the girl's death, real or counterfeit, through which Julius Winklejohn could claim her fortune as next of kin.

"That was when fortune and the señorita lay nearer his grasp than mine," frankly explained the bandit. "But now—I have the power, and I mean to have the fortune as well!"

Edgar Winklejohn could no longer blind himself to the ugly fact that this rascally brigand had completely overreached them both.

The knowledge fairly set him wild, and with a savage oath, he struck aside that armed hand, flinging himself upon Sandoval, both men falling to earth in what promised to be a death-grapple.

But a single shrill cry from the lips of their chief, brought several bandits rushing to the rescue, and only for Sandoval himself, Edgar must have paid penalty with his life.

Instead, Yellow Diego had him bound securely and carried after him as he strode away to the little *jacale* assigned to Georgia Winklejohn.

Pale and wan, plainly showing the effects of anxiety if not actual privation, the maiden shrank from that rude intrusion; but paying no attention to her for the moment, Sandoval curtly bade his fellows prop Winklejohn up against one side of the hut, then to depart.

Not until they were left alone did Sandoval explain; but his first words told Edgar Winklejohn how little mercy he might expect, now.

"This honorable gentleman, Miss Winklejohn, wishes to know why I delay in killing you, in order to transfer your fortune to his no less honorable father, your uncle!"

"A lie! Don't believe him, Georgia, for he is lying like—"

Sandoval turned quickly that way, and with a skill which told this was not his first attempt along those lines, he applied a gag which left Edgar powerless to speak in articulate tones.

Then he turned once more to the frightened and bewildered maiden, speaking with atrocious coolness, plainly resolved to lay bare the whole cruel plot against her life and her fortune.

He told how Julius Winklejohn had first approached him with an offer of rich pay for comparatively little work.

"He had run down here to look up the silver mines believed to be owned wholly or in main part by your lamented parent, señorita," explained the bandit. "It was then that we first met, although he lied about a former acquaintance when— But that does not matter!"

Sandoval went on to give full details, but much of which has already been shadowed forth with sufficient distinctness for our purpose.

Among other things he threw a cruel light upon that adventure with the two desperadoes, laying bare the whole plot which he declared had been formed by Edgar Winklejohn in hopes of winning Georgia as his wife.

It was all a farce, from capture to escape! And when Edgar struck his fierce blow for freedom, the club never touched his captor's head, but shivered itself against the trunk of the tree against which the burly rascal had purposely seated himself!

Georgia bowed her head and hid her face, feeling sick and faint as her worst suspicions were so plainly confirmed.

Edgar Winklejohn fought fiercely against his bonds and his gag, but all in vain; he was forced to see and hear all, without power to deny or to lie in his own defense.

Then Sandoval told how that double abduction had been arranged; how Julius Winklejohn was bound and gagged, a knife-cut deliberately laying open his scalp the better to blind suspicion; how Sandoval agreed to dispose of the maiden, sending her cousin back with ample proofs of her death while both had been trying to escape their captors.

"That was the agreement made with your worthy relative, Miss Winklejohn," coolly confessed the bandit. "But I never for an instant meant to keep my part of the bargain, after that bloody fashion. Instead—Listen, I pray you, señorita!"

"Why should I take the lesser half when I might just as well secure the whole fortune? Why should I murder you, when I might keep you as a loving, living, adorable bride?"

With a choking cry Georgia shrank as far away as those brief limits would permit; but Yellow Diego only laughed and showed his wolfish teeth, as though he found an exquisite pleasure in witnessing her loathing fear.

"I am speaking you plain truth, señorita, because I have no longer good reasons for wearing the mask. And now my golden harvest is ready for the sickle, why should I wait longer before garnering my crop?"

"It is this way, then, señorita, and you, noble señor!"

"Word shall be immediately dispatched to the anxious relative over the great river; but not such word as he so fondly awaits!"

"I will say to him: give me this maiden's dower, or she fares all the worse! I shall say: pay me all this fortune, or I return your son, with heart fixed between his grinning teeth!"

Georgia gave another shivering cry, and Sandoval abruptly altered his manner, crossing to her side, slipping an arm around her waist before she could divine his intention.

With a cry of indignation, Georgia broke away, striking the yellow knave full in his face with clinched hand; only a woman's stroke, yet a ring worn upon that hand cut deep through skin, letting free a rill of hot blood.

Sandoval recoiled, one hand flying up to his face, but he only laughed when he lowered his damp fingers to look at his own blood.

Then he leaned forward with swift gesture, crossing the maiden's forehead with his wet finger, laughing anew as he saw the bloody sign imprinted thereon.

"Thus I claim you, señorita!" he cried, mockingly. "By the cross I swear that you shall wed me, legally, religiously, of your own free will and accord! Because—while I shall prize and cherish my beautiful bride, I love her vast store of golden onzas even more ardently!"

He gave a sharp whistle, and several of his fellows came to bear away Edgar Winklejohn, putting him under an armed guard.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHITE HAWK AND YELLOW VULTURE.

FOLLOWING curt directions given by their chief, the *salteadores* carried Edgar Winklejohn away to the further side of the little valley, there dumping him into another rude *jacale*, in front of which an armed guard was stationed to make assurance doubly certain.

Here the outwitted schemer was left to enjoy his bitter reflections for several hours, long before the end of which he was viciously cursing himself and his crooked luck, but most bitterly of all calling down curses upon the head of his worthy progenitor, Julius Winklejohn.

Diego Sandoval purposely prolonged this solitary confinement, rightly reasoning that Edgar would better realize his precise condition if given ample opportunity for studying it all over.

But a little after the sun crossed the meridian the yellow chief entered that rude shelter, cutting away the gag which had until then remained in place, squatting on heels before his captive, showing his wolfish fangs in grim amusement as the bound knave fell to cursing the one left free.

That vicious torrent bade fair to flow too long for his pleasure, however, and leaning forward he struck those lips sharply, saying:

"Enough, you dog! 'Tis for you to listen and for me to talk! Be quiet, else my braves shall sew thy foul lips together!"

"I'll kill you for all this, you yellow devil!" hoarsely vowed the prisoner. "I'll never know rest until—"

A second still sharper blow cut his wild vow short, and Sandoval spoke again:

"Silence, hound! Another threat like that, and I'll pull your tongue out by the roots with red-hot pincers!"

That malignant look, even more than the savage words, checked the mad rage from which Edgar Winklejohn was suffering just then, and as he fought hard to choke back his curses, the yellow bandit spoke on:

"It is well that we reach a perfect understanding, señor, so—open well thy ears, for once saying must serve! I have a fairer prey than thou to dally with; my beautiful bird of paradise!"

A low chuckle followed that speech, his dingy paws rasping together after a fashion which reminded Edgar of a hungry wolf gloating over its freshly killed prey.

After a brief silence Diego Sandoval spoke on, putting the case in still plainer terms than he had while speaking mainly to Georgia Winklejohn, with cruel candor showing how completely he had outwitted his confederates in crime.

He spoke of the mining property in Mexico which the legal heir, or lawful husband of the young woman would gain full control of, and frankly admitted that a far smaller fortune would render such a union agreeable; with the beautiful señorita 'twould be a foretaste of heaven!

But why should a man rest content with half, when he might gain the whole by simply demanding it? And so—the señor comprehended?

If not just then, Edgar Winklejohn was speedily enlightened, for Sandoval no longer needed the cunning mask he had worn for so long, and cast aside even the shadow of disguise.

He said with the morrow a message should be started to Julius Winklejohn, revealing the exact situation, and offering the life of an only son, the death of an only niece!

"That is only half true, but what matter?" coolly admitted the yellow vulture, showing his teeth. "He will never know the truth until too late! He will pay a heavy ransom for your life. He will pay still more for the death of my love! And then—ha! ha!—then the whole world shall know how the two honorable gentlemen planned and plotted and sinned for the fortune their covetous fingers shall never touch in whole or in part, save to turn the yellow ounces over to me, their legal heir through the sacred words spoken by the holy father!"

For more than an hour Diego Sandoval practiced this mental torture, leaving no room for doubting just what course he had marked out for himself in this bold game for a fortune.

He meant to claim every dollar and say

lar's worth, through marriage with Georgia! He intended to strip Julius Winklejohn dry through his paternal affections; then—would he even then loose his grip?

Edgar Winklejohn answered this ugly doubt in the negative.

Once the yellow vulture had pressed extortion to the utmost, he would kill rather than let loose, as the surest method of guarding his own vile life!

Over and over the outwitted knave studied the situation, but ever with the same result: he must escape, or pay the penalty with his life!

Every thought, every energy was turned toward that single end, now.

He gave no further thought to his cousin. She must care for herself, so far as he was concerned. If only he might break away!

Edgar Winklejohn fell promptly to work upon his bonds, hoping to break or stretch the cords sufficiently far to slip out one hand after the other; not so wild a hope as might be fancied, thanks to his small hands and unusually large-boned wrists.

Sandoval himself brought supper to the *jacale*, feeding the prisoner and spicing food with malicious threats and thinly-veiled hints; but he saw nothing wrong with the bonds, and as soon as he took his departure Edgar fell to work with doubled energy.

Little by little the rawhide thongs yielded, and then, at cost of torn skin and bruised flesh, Winklejohn succeeded in slipping one hand out of bondage!

After that the rest came easily enough, and then the desperate man turned thoughts toward the armed sentry slowly pacing a beat in front of the brush shanty.

It seemed a desperate chance to take, but he knew he must escape or die; and watching his chance until the bandit's back was turned, Winklejohn sprung upon him, both hands closing about throat, knee boring into back, then a deft trip bringing the fellow to earth without a cry or a shot being fired.

Not until the robber ceased struggling did Winklejohn relax his grasp in the slightest; and then 'twas only to tear knife from girdle and plunge it hilt-deep in that heaving bosom.

Quickly stripping his victim of arms, buckling belt around his own middle, Edgar Winklejohn crouched low and glided away through the night, giving no thought to Georgia, thinking solely about saving his own life.

But the fates were turning against him, now, and the sharp howl of a dog gave the alarm; just how, Edgar never knew, but as he broke into a run he heard the fierce shouts and cries which warned him the murdered sentry had been found, and that it would be almost certain death should he again fall into those lawless hands.

Only for those accursed hounds!

With savage howls at first, then giving tongue in deep, far-echoing bays the animals struck off the trail of the bloodstained fugitive, showing the bandits whither to face.

Sandoval was hot upon the trail, and knowing the lay of the ground so much better than the fugitive, in less than ten minutes more Edgar Winklejohn was forced to bay, turning upon his yellow enemies, shooting until his confiscated pistols were empty, then plying knife and clubbed revolver with savage desperation.

He piled up a ghastly barricade before him, but the odds were far too great for any one man to withstand; and then he went down, bleeding and panting, sorely wounded yet living still when Diego Sandoval called off his human wolves.

Alive, but terribly injured! Yet there was a fair chance for saving his life, and still clinging to the thought of rich ransom, Yellow Diego bade his fellows bear the prisoner back to the camp.

This was done, letting his own dead and injured wait for the time being; and with his own hands Sandoval washed and temporarily bandaged those wounds; until that was done never giving so much as a thought to his other captive or her safe-keeping.

But then he passed over to the hut in which Georgia Winklejohn had been quartered for the present, meaning to assure her that her cousin was still alive and likely to live, but a fierce yell escaped his lips as he entered the shanty: for the maiden was no longer there!

CHAPTER XXIX.

SPARKLER SAM'S NIGHT-DASH.

THE Gold-lace Sport knew what he was talking about when he declared his ability to run down Yellow Diego and his branch of "Cortina's Lambs," yet that feat required more time and patience than Sparkler Sam had allowed, first-off.

For one thing, the two daring scouts had to guard against other enemies, which, in this case, comprised pretty much the entire Mexican race.

Discovery on that side of the Rio Grande would mean fighting or fleeing, if not both!

Yet the Texas Hercules stuck doggedly to work, and was finally rewarded by a glimpse of the bandit rendezvous there in the secluded vale surrounded by hills; and at the hour in which Diego Sandoval so pitilessly tore the scales from over the eyes of his dupe, Edgar Winklejohn, the two parads were lying under snug cover, looking down at the encampment, trying to see their way clear to rescue Georgia Winklejohn.

They had only a few minutes before made that all-important discovery, and even yet were not positive they had found the right quarry.

Both held that hope, Sparkler Sam vowed he couldn't be mistaken, yet the ugly doubt remained and doubled their anxiety.

It was not until they got a glimpse of Edgar Winklejohn, bound and helpless, being carried across the valley with Diego Sandoval walking alongside, that the scouts knew they were on the right track, and that in all probability Georgia was even then within sound of their voices should they shout aloud her name!

From that moment on Sparkler Sam had his hands full keeping Leonard under control; and if fate should have granted Austin even a passing glimpse of his loved one, only brute force could have kept him from breaking cover and charging camp, singlehanded. Those were anxious hours of waiting, and only by promising Leonard that they would that very night make the attempt to steal away the captive maid, could Sparkler Sam maintain his authority.

By closely watching the movements of Diego Sandoval, they discovered the particular hut in which Georgia was confined, and with that point fairly settled, they watched the coming of night with rising hopes.

"If it wasn't for those infernal curs!" Sparkler Sam muttered, his brows contracting as he took note of the prowling hounds in the valley spread out before his eyes. "It's long odds they scent us out and kick up a holy jamboree!"

But that was a risk they had to run, for it would be well-nigh impossible for them to wait out another whole day so near the encampment, without being discovered by dog or men.

And so it came about that just when Edgar Winklejohn was watching his chance to surprise his armed guard, the two scouts were silently stealing toward the other rude hut, where a few moments later Georgia was amazed by hearing her name breathed softly by the lips of her true-love!

And when the fierce alarm of that other escape broke forth, the two daring Rangers were hurrying their prize up the slope opposite the course taken by Edgar Winklejohn; and long before that savage fight reached its ending, the maiden was clinging fast to her lover's waist as the two horsemen rode away through the night!

Hasty though that flight was from the very first, still Georgia found time to explain, in part.

She had made up her mind that no fate could be worse than remaining in the power of Diego Sandoval, now he had so completely laid off all disguise; and she was just on the point of stealing out of and away from her rude shelter in hopes of escaping from the valley during that night, when the glad recognition came to her ears.

Both Leonard and Sparkler Sam were dangerously angry when she gave them a fair idea of the wicked scheming which had been going on for so long, and it was with many a look over shoulder, many a half-smothered growl that the Texas Samson gave way to common prudence and kept on retreating toward the far-away Rio Grande.

"I swore I'd hang the yellow devil, and I'm bound to make good my oath!" he said, over and over again. "If I was only by my lonesome, now!"

"But you're not, old Fire-and-fury!" quickly interposed Leonard, now the one to counsel craft rather than force. "We've got what we came so far for, and—Heaven help us to guard you from all peril, my darling!"

"Amen to all that!" promptly cried the Gold-lace Sport, with a return of his usual joviality. "And—pardner!"

"What is it, Sam?"

"Of course you're heap-plenty grateful for this rich blessing?"

"God knows I am!"

"Well, then, prove it, you blessed idiot!" quickly exclaimed the big fellow, reining in his horse and making it wheel squarely around. "Now, you bashful chump! If I filled your shoes—and if I had my Little Kid right where you—Do it again, pardner! I'm blind and deaf and couldn't see or hear if a thunderbolt of electric lightning was to ramjam me right in the—Ahem!"

In spite of his loudly proclaimed disabilities, Sparkler Sam knew when it would be prudent to face that way again, and if the light was too dim to fully portray those flushed cheeks, so much the better!

By this time the fugitives had made more than fair progress, putting at least a couple of miles behind them since leaving the little valley where they found Georgia Winklejohn; but that distance was not so great as to hinder Sparkler Sam from making a disagreeable discovery.

Ever since leaving the valley he had been listening for a repetition of those deep bell-notes which can only come from throat of hound on a warm trail.

So far he had missed hearing any such sounds, and had actually begun to hope that the flight or rescue of the maiden would not be discovered until the night was fairly spent; but that hope was rudely banished now!

Faint, and indistinct, deadened a good bit by the forest which lay between, yet impossible to mistake for aught less dangerous, the Gold-lace Sport now caught the mellow notes and knew that Diego Sandoval had not only discovered his loss, but was trying to retrieve it through the aid of his four-footed allies.

Sparkler Sam said nothing to alarm the lovers, but quietly hastened their pace, hoping still to foil both hounds and vultures.

For a few minutes he succeeded in keeping this fresh peril a secret from his companions, but then a favoring current of wind brought those ominous sounds distinctly to their ears, and Leonard gave a low exclamation of angry fear.

"That's what's the matter, pardner," gravely spoke the big fellow. "I've known it for ten minutes back, but didn't think it worth while to bother you."

"But—how can we shake 'em off, Sam?"

"I'm not so sure we can shake 'em off, pardner; but this much is dead sure: if they hunt us too mighty close, somebody will be out a pack of hounds!"

The fugitives quickened their pace until they were riding as fast as possible, taking the nature of the ground into consideration.

"There's one thing dead sure," declared Sparkler Sam, after a bit. "We can ride as fast as any man can follow! And if those hounds are gaining any on us, they'll come up just that far ahead of the two-legged curs!"

There was some faint consolation in this reflection, but it had hardly occurred to the Gold-lace Sport ere he made another discovery, still more startling.

The fugitives had entered a long, narrow pass where the rocky sides rose for scores of feet almost perpendicularly; and they were near its middle when Sparkler Sam caught suspicious sounds coming from the front and only a short distance away!

A brief listening, then he uttered a low, fierce oath, drawing revolvers and cocking them as he spoke to his mate:

"The devils have circled on us, Aus! You look after the little woman, and rush her through if it takes a leg! For me—I'll shoot a red lane clean through those whelps, big enough for you to ride clear!"

CHAPTER XXX.

SPARKLER SAM KEEPS HIS VOW.

WHEN Yellow Diego found his precious prize missing, he stood for a brief space like one petrified, unable to trust his own senses.

How could she have escaped, alone and unaided? Even though the mask had fallen and she been permitted to see him as he really was, Sandoval had never even dreamed of such a possibility as an effort at flight on the maiden's part.

So far from friends and country! So many long leagues lay between that valley and the Rio Grande, where first the girl could hope to meet with friends and protectors.

Yet—she was missing!

That ugly fact confronted him, and with a low, vicious howl of rage the bandit sprang away in search.

He thought Edgar Winklejohn might have had something to do with this vanishment, and hurried first of all to where that wounded wretch was lying under close guard; but he was insensible, now, and naught was to be learned from his blanched lips.

Then Sandoval bethought himself of the hounds, and without further loss of time he called their services into requisition, trying to make them understand what was wanted, and in the mean while scattering his yellow vultures throughout the valley in search for the missing maiden.

The four-footed brutes were first to strike scent, and after losing a good many valuable minutes in carrying the trail across the beaten ground there in the valley, the hounds gave tongue freely when rising the northern slope.

This told Sandoval they had actually found the right trail, and still under the delusion that Georgia could not have found aid, but must be fleeing alone and independent, he had the hounds caught up and muzzled lest they materially damage their prey when running it to bay.

Those muzzles, while sufficient to hinder their tearing their human game, permitted the hounds a fair use of their tongues; and soon the Mexican hills were echoing merrily, until a listener might have fancied himself aural witness to a grand, old-time fox-hunt.

With hardly an exception, so far as able-bodied bandits were concerned, Yellow Diego was joined by his men, who seemed inclined to make it a frolic rather than stern business.

For the most part they were mounted, although a few trusted to their own activity on foot, knowing that over such a rough scope of country, and by right in the bargain, they could readily hold their own with four-legged animals.

If he had not such implicit confidence in his pack of hounds, no doubt Sandoval would have fared better, even if he did not entirely escape the deadly work lying ahead; but so long as the dogs lifted trail freely, meeting with no loss or double, he never once thought it necessary to strike a light to study that spoor by.

Only once did even the faintest suspicion of the truth strike him, and that was when one of his fellows on foot excitedly called out that he had found fresh droppings.

A single match was struck and the truth of that announcement made manifest; but the soil was dry and stony, and hardly a trace of hoof-strokes could be distinguished.

"That explains it all, then!" muttered Sandoval, as the little torch burned down to his finger-tips, then went out. "She's stolen a horse, and hopes to out-foot us! Well, if she does, she deserves to go free!"

This discovery took place only a few rods before the trailing hounds dashed into the mouth of the narrow pass where Sparkler Sam on his part made a far more amazing discovery; and riding on close at the heels of his pack, Diego Sandoval pressed through the defile and gave a low whoop of fierce exultation as he struck the open country on the further side of the ridge.

For the baying of his lead-hound changed abruptly, and he knew his game had been brought to bay!

So he called out to his human hounds, and they flocked forward in hot haste to view the end of that midnight race.

Then—

"Sock it to 'em, lads!" thundered the grim old Ranger captain as he opened fire; and like an echo burst forth the leonine roar of the Gold-lace Sport as that living avalanche of death and destruction plunged recklessly into the very midst of the lawless gang.

A sheet of flame lit up the scene as the force of Rangers opened fire before fairly breaking cover, and a number of the bandits went down in death, while others were crippled or sharply stung by the flying lead.

All were cast into utter confusion, for the surprise could not not have been more complete, and almost before he could realize what had broken loose, Diego Sandoval saw more than half his force killed or disabled!

Like one going to a wedding-feast, Sparkler Sam plunged into the very midst of that awful confusion, his ringing voice keeping time with the rapid barking of his revolvers, his gay laugh and reckless jesting marking every stroke of blade or thrust of fist.

But through it all he kept looking for his particular prey, Diego Sandoval, time and again shouting forth that name, bidding Yellow Diego to stand up like a man and take his last medicine!

"I swore I'd hang you, Satan's whelp! I'm here to make good my oath, and all it lacks is— Oh, do come and see me, you spawn of Hades!"

That the two deadly enemies failed to meet sooner was through no fault on either side, for, after that first stunning surprise, the bandit chief fought desperately and with a courage deserving a better reward.

He sent back a vicious curse as he heard those fiercely mocking calls, but for a time that mad struggle kept them wide apart.

Then Sparkler Sam caught sight of his prey by the moonshine, and forced horse that way, roaring forth his reckless challenge once more.

Sandoval fired his last shots at that swooping shadow of death, and gave a fierce yell as he saw both horse and rider plunge headlong when only a few feet away!

"Hal hal! At last!" he shouted. "Oh, yes; you wanted Sandoval, and now you've met him—hal hal!"

But he exulted too early. Sparkler Sam kicked feet out of stirrups and fell clear of the brain-pierced steed, then gave another savage roar as he scrambled to his feet, just as the Yellow Chief leaped upon him, knife in hand.

A swift clutch met that descending blow, and an involuntary scream of pain and rage from Sandoval's lips as his arm was twisted back and aside, the glittering weapon flying away from his unnerved fingers as a sickening snap told of fractured bones!

"Now I have got ye!" roared the living colossus, whirling his enemy around as though he felt it no more than an image of straw. "I swore I'd never give over until I'd played hangman for your benefit, Yellow Diego, and—here she goes!"

The Mexican strove to break away, but one arm was already rendered helpless, and the other was caught by that mighty hand before it could work any particular injury.

The fighting was fairly over, now, but Sparkler Sam gave heed to naught else than his own especial game.

Dragging Sandoval back to where his dead horse lay, the Texas Samson stooped down to slip free a coiled lasso from the saddle-bow!

"Steady, you whelp of Satan! Your hour has sounded, and there's no reprieve coming your way!" sternly cried the Gold-lace Sport, once more standing erect and holding his captive out at full length of his arm, fingers closed tightly around that throbbing throat.

"Kick, you cur! Dance while the band plays, my lovely imp! Ah-hal! I swore to make you pull hemp, but I'd rather look at ye choke after this sweet fashion!"

Giving Sandoval a fierce shake, Sparkler Sam let his feet touch ground once more, shifting fingers to those stiff, wiry locks of hair, so holding the bandit helpless while shaking out his coiled lariat.

Dropping noose over head, Sampson quickly drew it snugly in place, then laughed

fiercely as he rushed his victim across to where stood a single, lightning-blasted tree, over a bare arm of which he tossed the lasso, catching the loose end as it came down.

Then he jerked the bandit clear of earth, crying out:

"Now—kick, you cur! Kick as you made my old pard dance on air! It is your own medicine administered in full dose—sure to cure!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

SPARKLER SAM'S BENEDICTION

It proved to be an almost bloodless victory for the Texan Rangers, thanks to the completeness of their surprise.

That is easily explained, for just as Sparkler Sam knotted reins to keep them out of the way when he tried to "shoot a red lane" through the force so unexpectedly met in that narrow defile, a stern challenge rung forth, unmistakably shaped by tongue of American.

And a minute later the fugitives were in the midst of Sparkler Sam's own company of Rangers, hurriedly giving thanks and receiving congratulations; and then, as the baying of hounds sounded more plainly, the story was told and an ambuscade formed.

Retreating from the pass, the Rangers divided, part lying in wait on either side of the mouth of the defile, the rest, including the fugitives, passing on several rods further.

Then the bandits were fairly inclosed in the net, and after that first deadly volley, the Rangers closed in to show no more mercy than they would have expected had the situation been reversed.

It seemed little better than a massacre, but only those who have experienced border life in the days now happily gone by forever, can even fairly imagine such intense enmity as then existed between White Hawks and Yellow Vultures!

For this reason, too, no one lifted hand to hinder Sparkler Sam from making good his vow of hanging, and when all was over, the Gold-laced Sport received congratulations rather than reproaches.

Sampson shook all this off, not yet sufficiently calmed to speak of the matter in his customary vein; and then he quickly broached another subject in which he succeeded in wakening a strong interest.

In company with Austin Leonard, Sparkler Sam told his chief of the events which had taken place at Sandoval's rendezvous, and while he was by no means positive that Edgar Winklejohn had escaped death in that hot skirmish, he asked permission to take a picked squad over the back trail, not alone to find out about the maiden's cousin, but to perfect their work by destroying the haunt of the bandits.

The captain listened in grave silence until Sparkler Sam ceased speaking, then gave his decision.

"You can make the trip, Sam, if you like, but no burning. We're a long ways from our own side of the river, and with the lady to think of, can't afford to blaze our trail too mighty clear!"

He could well afford to advise prudence, this grim old veteran, for never another name on the long roll of Texan Rangers was more gallantly distinguished than that borne by his mother's son!

After all, the Gold-lace Sport had carried his main point, and without giving chance for a change of mind, he quickly selected a few choice spirits on whom he could wholly depend, no matter what the odds facing them.

As a matter of course, Austin Leonard asked to be included, but only to be refused by his pard; as the only one with whom Miss Winklejohn was acquainted, he surely ought to stay in her company!

That return trip was made in good shape, and Sparkler Sam found no opposition to his taking full possession of the little valley.

As stated, all able-bodied bandits had accompanied Diego Sandoval, and those wounded in the fight with Edgar Winklejohn, crept out of sight and hearing as quickly as possible, thankful not to be chased and slain.

A surprise met the Gold lace Sport as he reached the brush hut to which the wounded prisoner had been carried after his recapture.

Pablo Zarate lay near Winklejohn's feet,

stabbed to the heart with his own knife, after having cruelly cut the prisoner!

Life still lingered, yet past all doubting Edgar Winklejohn was dying, rapidly!

Still, he managed to whisper that the Mexican had tried to butcher him through revenge for his own hurts, and after a terrible fight had been slain with his own weapon.

He begged Sparkler Sam to tell Georgia he was sorry for his sins against her, and begging her forgiveness, he gave a spasmodic gasp.

His throat filled with blood, and after a brief struggle, he died!

Although his sins had been many, Sparkler Sam insisted on giving the remains a fairly decent burial.

"At worst, he was an American! We'll not leave him here for the yellow dogs to mock and make merry over!"

It was fairly dawn when Sparkler Sam led his little squad safely back to the Ranger camp, and after a hasty meal, the entire party took up their journey homeward.

Knowing only too well that if their invasion should be discovered, those hills and plains would fairly swarm with armed foemen eager to wipe out the entire party, swift retreat was the word, and mile after mile was placed behind the company in rapid succession.

During that ride to the Rio Grande, Georgia Winklejohn, now happy in the presence of her lover and the blessed assurance of his adoration, could no longer keep the barrier between them, briefly but clearly explaining the important business which had induced her to visit that wild portion of the southern border.

Sparkler Sam had made a fairly shrewd guess as to past events, for Julian Winklejohn had separated from his wife in life, not by death!

He alone of all who still bore the name of Winklejohn knew that both wife and a younger daughter were living, or had been alive only two or three years prior to his writing that secret confession.

He declared that at the time of separating, when he gave out that his wife was dead, he thought he had good and sufficient grounds for informally divorcing her; but of late years he had become convinced to the contrary, plainly declaring his belief that his wife had been cruelly maligned by an enemy whom he had thought his best and truest friend.

He begged Georgia to seek her mother, and if still living, to convey his prayer for forgiveness, as well as to share her fortune with mother and sister, should both be found, alive.

"In closing, father warned me against placing too implicit trust in his brother, Uncle Julius," the maiden concluded, her voice lowering, and her great brown eyes glistening moistly by the firelight as she sat with hands tightly clasped in her lap.

"Right there's where his head was level, anyway," blurted out Sparkler Sam, unable to hold in longer.

"I know. I never fully trusted uncle, but I couldn't even guess that he would prove so—so utterly vile! Unless—do you think it is true, Austin? Mightn't that Sandoval be lying when he said—"

The two pards interchanged swift glances, then Leonard nodded, and reaching out to clasp one little hand in his great paw, the Gold-lace Sport gravely, gently spoke of what they had found on his return to the bandit camp.

"The young fellow wasn't all bad, you see," he added, softly, as the maiden bowed head in hands and wept silently over her cousin's fate. "He must have repented at the last, else he'd never sent a prayer for pardon to you, little woman! And—well, here's hoping Edgar Winklejohn may fare better in the world he's gone to, than ever he did down here!"

With that brief benediction, Sparkler Sam dropped the gloomy subject, rattling on in his jovial way until Georgia dried her tears and fell to laughing instead to weeping.

Austin Leonard took chance to ask his pard why he refrained from saying aught about the wonderful resemblance he had found in Rhoda Maynard; but a broad palm crossed his lips, and the Sport with mock fierceness tabooed that subject.

"Wait until I get a good ready, old boy!"

When the proper time comes you can wager all your old socks I'll be on deck with my budget of marvels; until then—hold your hush or I'll wade in and cut you right where you live!"

"Regardless of the Little Kid?" maliciously whispered Leonard.

By way of answer, the giant caught Austin around his middle, giving him a dizzy swing and whirl, then tossing him high into a scrubby-topped tree, from whence he had to roll rather than climb down.

By the time he touched earth again, Sparkler was off, laughing in boyish glee at the success of his little trick.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SPARKLER SAM'S REVELATION.

Nothing further was said on that particular point by either of the two pards until their perilous journey was nearing its completion, and the bright waters of the Rio Grande were almost within sight.

So far nothing had happened to give the company trouble. For once it seemed as though all enemies had been transported from those regions, and the more belligerent among the rough riders began to fear they would strike no more "fun" on Mexican soil that trip.

For a wonder, Sparkler Sam took no part in these grave laments.

Austin Leonard tried to snub him by more or less pointed allusions to "the Little Kid," but that title had lost its terror for the Giant Ranger, now, and back would come some lively retort which never failed to change the subject, if only to spare Georgia's blushes.

Night caught the little company when still a few miles south of the great water-course, and having seen nothing to cause them uneasiness, the Ranger Chief called a halt, and camp-fires were soon cheerily ablaze and preparations for the evening meal under way.

Not until then did Sparkler Sam make known the deductions he had drawn from the story told by Georgia Winklejohn concerning the sacred trust bequeathed her by Julian Winklejohn.

Drawing the lovers far enough apart from the main company to insure their privacy, Parker Sampson told how his curiosity had first been awakened by the strange resemblance his "Little Kid" bore to the Winklejohn beauty; and then he gave in detail the various experiments he had tried, particularly upon the Widow Maynard.

While all these taken separately might not have amounted to much, combined as the Gold-lace Sport had mentally arranged them during their homeward ride, the whole produced almost certain conviction in the mind of Georgia Winklejohn, who betrayed strong agitation as she listened.

If anything was lacking, she felt the link was forged when Sparkler Sam spoke that name: for Julian Winklejohn had married a Miss Maynard!

As a matter of course the maiden had many eager questions to ask, all of which were answered by the Gold-lace Sport to the best of his ability; but then he took the lead once more, and with deeper gravity spoke:

"If you consider that I have been of service to you, Miss—"

"Of service?" echoed Georgia, brown eyes glistening with tears, but with joy showing in her charming face. "I knew that—that mother had once lived in Texas, near the Rio Grande, but that was my only clue!"

"Father never knew under what name she was passing, nor just where she had located. All the clue he could furnish was just that: less than three years before he died, mother was alive, and somewhere in Texas!"

"A faint clue indeed!" observed Leonard, who showed hardly less interest in the matter than his sweetheart. "How chanced it you came to this place, Georgia?"

A shadow came over the maiden's face at that question, but then she made reply:

"Uncle Julius influenced me, as I know now. Until I discovered his wickedness, I never suspected the fact; but I know it was through his covert wishes that I came here."

"Bless Uncle Julius for so much, anyway!" briskly exclaimed Sparkler Sam. "Only for your coming here, I'd never have

stopped long enough to find my—to play the fool after the fashion I did! And that brings me around to the favor I wished to beg of you, both!"

"You can ask nothing I would hesitate to grant, my good friend," the maiden said, her little hand going out to meet his great paw.

"Well, I don't know about that! If I should ask you to give up what you'd only lately found? If I should—Steady, boy! Don't run over your own heels, Samuel!"

"If it is about the Little Kid—"

A broad palm closed the young Ranger's mouth, and the Gold-lace Sport quickly added:

"What I ask is just this, good people: keep your fingers out of my pie! I made such a blessed idiot of myself trying to bring you two hot-heads together—Well, now, just look at that!"

Sparkler Sam flung up both hands in wide-eyed amaze as Austin folded Georgia to his breast, kissing her red lips ardently.

"She is my promised bride, Sam, and you call it playing the fool!" exclaimed the Ranger, his eyes moistened through strong emotion. "Only for you I'd never know what happiness or contentment meant again in this world!"

"Glory to Moses—amen!" cried Sparkler Sam, winding arms around his own body and ecstatically hugging himself. "I'm going to have some of that same medicine, or break my blessed neck trying! And so—good-night to you both! I'm off for—"

"Whither, Sam?"

"To find my delicious Little Kid and—tell her you're coming, of course!" cried the happy Sport, as he hurried away, to prepare his good steed for the road once more.

And so it all came about!

When the company of Rangers rode into town the next forenoon, the Gold-lace Sport met them just outside, a bright smile lighting up his face and merry words crossing his lips.

All had prospered finely, and Georgia might expect a cordial if rather damp greeting from her mother and younger sister.

"And—am I to congratulate Rhoda, dear friend?" asked the young woman, with a touch of mischief finding way through her happy tears.

"For your life, no! Leave me time—let me gradually accustom her to my awkward bigness, or—blamed if I don't carry Aus. off and turn him over to the tender mercies of that other woman he's so 'dead in love' with!"

There is little necessity for giving that interview in detail, since enough has already been said to give the reader a fair idea of the story.

Mrs. Winklejohn had never ceased to love her husband, though treated so harshly on mere suspicion which had now been proven without foundation in fact; but her pride had been too deeply wounded for her to ever seek a reconciliation, even while she strove to keep posted as to the career of husband and eldest daughter.

This was the trust she placed in Morgan Gwynne, the unfortunate lawyer whose ill-timed death Sparkler Sam reported. She had lost all trace of Julian Winklejohn, and besought Gwynne to learn for her what had happened.

Julius Winklejohn was visited by the two pards, who reported the fate which had overtaken his son; and this, together with the discovery of his own black scheming, completely broke the old man up, and that same night he disappeared, no one could say how or whither!

Austin Leonard resigned from the Rangers and took Georgia Winklejohn for his wife.

Sparkler Sam and Rhoda "stood up with them," and the Gold-lace Sport not only kissed the fair bride, but the fairer bridesmaid as well!

Of course he had his ears soundly boxed by the "Little Kid" as penalty; but, nothing daunted, the happy fellow declared he would take the entire invoice at the same figures!

And did he?

Well, that would be a safe bet to make, as any of his old comrades might have told you; for the Gold-lace Sport certainly had a peculiar way of getting whatever he went after!

THE END.

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